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Throughout his career, he has taught creative writing, acting, languages, philosophy, and the humanities in India, the United States, the United Kingdom, Portugal, Colombia, Kyrgyzstan, and Mexico.

In 2014, he was recognized by the Presidency of Colombia as one of the 100 Most Influential Colombians in the World.

Winner of the Cultura con Berraquera Literary Award, presented by the Government of Santander, Colombia.

Set in 1970s Colombia, The Expelled Boy tells the story of seven-year-old Marco Saint-André, a brilliant, restless child whose curiosity and imagination lead to his expulsion from one of Bucaramanga's most prestigious schools. Transferred to a poorer public school, he befriends Pepito, the son of displaced farmers living beside a ravine beneath a highway bridge.

Their friendship is shattered when a classmate disappears during a government-sponsored event and is later found dead. While adults dismiss Marco's suspicions as childish fantasy, he begins uncovering a web of corruption, political violence, false identities, and murder that reaches far beyond anything a child should ever witness.

Meanwhile, Marco's father loses his government job and struggles to rebuild the family's future through courage, ingenuity, and unwavering integrity, teaching his son that dignity is measured not by success, but by perseverance.

Blending literary fiction, historical suspense, family drama, and the emotional intensity of childhood, The Expelled Boy is an unforgettable novel about innocence confronted by evil, the resilience of family, the transforming power of books, and the courage to defend the truth when no one else is willing to believe it.

The Expelled Boy — Hugo Noël Santander Ferreira

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The Travels of Marco Saint-André

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For Zorayda, my mother, the most virtuous.
For Flavio, my father, the most honorable.

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A man cannot see himself in muddy water.

— Chuang Tzu

Foreword – The Making of a Conscience

In the pages of *The Expelled Boy*, Hugo Noël Santander Ferreira invites readers into a childhood shaped by memory, faith, family, and violence in the mountains of northeastern Colombia. Set against the backdrop of the great viaduct overlooking the city of Bucaramanga, this novel is drawn from real events and personal memories, shaped into literature.

Some names and identifying details have been altered, yet the emotional truth remains intact. It is a work rescued from silence, written by someone who has looked directly into the contradictions of his country without surrendering either compassion or dignity.

Marco Saint-André's childhood belongs to him, yet it also belongs to countless children who have grown up under institutions that valued obedience over understanding and punishment over education. His story unfolds in a nation still bearing the scars of *La Violencia*, Colombia's mid-twentieth-century civil conflict, where family loyalties, political hatred, and inherited fears often shaped a child's destiny long before he could choose it for himself.

The landscape is unmistakably Colombian—the mountain rains, the narrow streets, the food shared at school, the conversations drifting through open windows—but the questions the novel asks are universal. How does a child learn to distinguish justice from authority? What happens when sincerity is

mistaken for rebellion? How do love and discipline become so entangled that one begins to resemble the other?

Through Marco's eyes we encounter a society where schools become moral battlegrounds, families offer both shelter and confinement, and silence often serves as the safest form of survival. His curiosity challenges assumptions that few adults dare examine, revealing how prejudice, fear, and institutional certainty shape ordinary lives.

This book began out of necessity: to recover memories that demanded language before they disappeared. What emerged is far more than an autobiography. Hugo transforms personal experience into a broader meditation on education, conscience, faith, forgiveness, and the formation of moral character.

The bridge overlooking Bucaramanga gradually becomes far more than a physical structure. It stands as the place from which memory observes an entire life. From its height, childhood, family, violence, and hope appear not as isolated episodes but as parts of a single landscape. The novel moves naturally between intimate domestic scenes and the wider history of Colombia, where paramilitary groups, political vengeance, and social division left marks that reached even the classrooms where children learned their first lessons about authority.

The Expelled Boy is never simply a historical novel. Its deepest concerns are profoundly human. A mother ironing school uniforms before sunrise. A father repairing an aging Chevrolet. A frightened child

discovering both cruelty and unexpected kindness. These quiet moments give the novel its emotional center, reminding us that history ultimately lives within ordinary families.

Readers of works such as *Angela's Ashes*, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, *The Glass Castle*, or *To Kill a Mockingbird* will recognize a similar moral landscape, where childhood becomes the lens through which an entire society is revealed. Marco gradually learns that institutions, like families, possess both virtues and failures; that truth often demands solitude; and that growing up requires questioning the stories adults mistake for certainty.

What distinguishes *The Expelled Boy* is its refusal to reduce human beings to heroes or villains. Hugo neither accuses nor excuses. He observes with remarkable patience, allowing compassion and moral responsibility to coexist. Every act carries consequences; every wound leaves an inheritance; every gesture of grace offers the possibility of renewal.

I have read this novel with gratitude, sorrow, admiration, and hope. Each page bears the careful precision of a surveyor and the tenderness of a mother. Marco, the boy whose questions unsettle everyone around him, ultimately speaks for all who have struggled to preserve their integrity while growing up in imperfect families and imperfect nations.

The Expelled Boy reminds us that forgiveness is neither forgetting nor surrender. It is the courage to face the past without allowing it to dictate the future. The novel becomes a bridge toward our own memories—a

place where childhood is neither romanticized nor condemned, but understood in all its complexity. For every novel of merit is, in its own way, a bridge spanning the abyss between memory and oblivion.

Leyla Tobías de Santander
Sincelejo, Colombia
July 2026

Chapter 1. The Banco de Santander Robbery

It was the year 1970, and Bogotá was a whirlwind of tension, the air thick with smog, the echo of April's election-fraud protests still ringing off the corners. The cobblestones downtown, worn smooth by the passage of trolleybuses and pedestrians, lay wrapped in the steam of coffee stands, the exhaust of buses, and the endless parade of street vendors.

Luis, son of Matías, had left behind the tree-lined streets of Bucaramanga, with its parks of leafy ceiba trees and the murmur of its ravines, to sink into the capital's underworld. At twenty-two, his face bronzed by the sun, his eyes carrying a mixture of daring and caution, he had fallen in with three thugs: Gil, a sly, hollow-eyed beanpole with an aristocratic smile and a limp caused by a romantic fall from a second-story window; Manolo, thickset, his laugh rumbling like an old engine; and Pablo, silent, a cigarette forever hanging from his lips, its smoke curling like a secret.

Together they stripped stolen cars bound for the repair shops of Paloquemao, where blackened floors stretched beneath hanging tools and gutted engines crowded every corner, and they robbed houses in the old northern neighborhoods—Palermo, Chapinero Alto, El Chicó—reselling appliances at the pawnshops

along Carrera Décima in San Victorino, where the jingle of coins and the shouts of vendors filled the market air.

One April night, under a sky black as coal, they planned a robbery in a mansion in the Rosales neighborhood, on Calle 72 and Carrera Segunda: a two-story house with tall iron gates and gardens thick with jasmine, its freshly pruned vines tracing a precise outline against the metal.

Luis, skilled in mapmaking and design, led the plan. His father, Matías, a former *chulavita* and a deft driver for the government's land registry office, had drilled into him the art of calculating routes and anticipating escapes, lessons etched like the lines of a blueprint.

"Always have a way out, son," Matías would tell him in his aguardiente-roughened voice, as he drove the curves of Bucaramanga, the city lights reflected in the windshield. "The streets are a chessboard, and you've got to move your pieces first."

The mansion was supposedly empty—according to intelligence bought from the neighborhood's beggars, its owners were vacationing in Miami—but a dog next door sensed strangers and would not stop barking. The neighbors, alerted by the barking, by breaking glass, by hurried footsteps, called the police. The four of them had slipped in through a back window, forcing the lock with a screwdriver that jarred the silence. The wooden floor creaked beneath their feet, while the waxed sheen of the furniture seemed to merge, in their eyes, with the sweat beading on their foreheads.

Luis, carrying a small flashlight, led the way, its beam cutting through the gloom like a knife. Manolo hauled a sack of silver candlesticks and a wall clock that ticked like an anxious heart, grunting under the weight. Pablo took a painting down off the wall, his hands trembling slightly, while Gil kept watch at the entrance, his eyes scanning the shadows of the garden.

"Hurry up, we don't have all night!" Gil hissed, his voice a cutting whisper.

Their haul was impressive: a tube television as heavy as a piece of furniture, a small refrigerator, a record player with a stack of vinyl LPs, jewelry glittering in glass cases, and a pair of silver candlesticks that flashed under the flashlight's beam. Luis pointed to the moving truck parked on the street, a hulking stolen Mack R-600, its engine roaring like an enraged rhinoceros. They loaded everything into the back, the objects clanging dully against one another, and jumped in. But the sirens were already wailing in the distance, a howl closing in like a swarm.

"The neighbors!" Luis shouted, cursing under his breath, and gunned the truck's engine.

He drove down Calle 72, the engine growling, and turned onto Carrera 15. In 1970, Carrera 15 was a wide, straight avenue, almost a highway, with few cars and flickering streetlamps lighting up asphalt slick with a fine drizzle. The patrol cars followed, their red and blue lights flashing in the rearview mirrors, sirens slicing through the night like knives. Luis floored it, the truck vibrating, the tires screeching against the pavement. To slow the patrol cars and lighten the load, he shouted:

"Throw the stuff out!"

Manolo and Pablo, from the back, began hurling the appliances. The television struck a patrol car, its glass exploding into a thousand pieces, fragments glinting under the streetlights. The record player went flying, smashing another cruiser's windshield, sending it skidding into a lamppost with a crunch of metal. On Calle 85, Manolo threw the refrigerator, which rolled across the asphalt with a roar and struck an officer running on foot, trying to block the road. The impact threw him onto the pavement, leaving him dazed in the street. The crowd gathered on the sidewalks screamed in horror, their voices mingling with the shriek of brakes.

"Keep throwing!" Luis ordered, sweat running down his forehead, his hands gripping the wheel.

They reached Calle 100 with the candlesticks and jewels still rattling in the truck bed, continued uphill, and then turned onto Carrera Séptima, heading back south. The Séptima was a chaos of buses, trolleybuses, and pedestrians, the smell of gasoline and street food thick in the air. The patrol cars, slowed by the wreckage, lost ground, but their sirens still wailed. At Calle 93, Luis ran a red light and took the steep road up toward La Calera, the pines and eucalyptus rising like dark sentinels, their branches casting shadows that danced under the moon. The patrol cars caught up, bullets whistling past their ears, splinters flying like insects. A grey cloud hung suspended among the trees as fresh volleys of gunfire shattered the truck's windows.

Seeing they'd be surrounded, Luis shouted:

"This is escape plan B! Hold on!"

He wrenched the wheel hard, sending the truck careening off the edge. The trees splintered as the metal struck them, stopping the vehicle at an impossible angle, the candlesticks and jewels rolling around in the back. Gasoline began pooling beneath the chassis, forming an iridescent sheet that ran down the slope. Luis, Gil, and Pablo stumbled out, their clothes torn by branches, but Manolo, trapped in the cab, screamed, his voice choked with panic.

"Get me out!" he roared, pounding the glass with his fists.

They had staggered barely ten meters from the Mack when a spark ignited the gasoline, and the truck exploded into a fireball that lit up the night, the heat scorching their faces. Manolo never got out. The smell of his burning flesh and melting metal mixed with the smoke, and for the first time, the ruffian felt what it was to breathe in the very violence he usually reserved for his victims.

Luis, his heart in his throat, ran with Gil and Pablo through the trees, the wet ground slipping beneath their feet, to a stream where they hid. The icy water soothed their wounds, but not the guilt weighing like a stone on their chests.

"That was a fucking disaster," Pablo gasped, spitting blood, the extinguished cigarette still hanging from his mouth. "No more houses."

Luis, watching the moon's reflection in the water, nodded, his breath ragged.

"This calls for a blood-soaked revenge no one will ever forget," Gil said, his voice steady though he trembled inside. "Let's go after a bank. Or take over an embassy."

"Even better," Luis answered, the memory of his friend's charred flesh still fresh in his mind, "the Presidential Palace."

Pablo, wiping the sweat from his brow, raised an eyebrow, his eyes glinting with a flash of madness.

"A bank? Are you crazy?" he asked, his voice a rough murmur.

"Not if we pull it off right," Gil answered, recalling stories told by fellow criminals about daring heists, spun on nights in Ciudad Bolívar under the hum of a fan. "But we need cover. We need a motive that doesn't smell like a common robbery."

Gil smiled, his yellowed teeth gleaming in the dim light, and pulled a crumpled pamphlet from his pocket, along with a list of phrases scrawled on a dirty sheet of paper.

"Politics," he added, unfolding the pamphlet—a copy of the *Communist Manifesto*. "In prison they taught me a trick: if you shout political slogans, they won't give you more than five years, no matter what you do. Murder, kidnapping, robbery… If you do it in the name of the opposition, the law goes soft."

"What the hell is that?" Luis asked, frowning, his hands still trembling from the adrenaline.

Gil pointed to the phrases on the paper, his finger stained with dirt.

"This," he said. "If something goes wrong, you shout: 'Long live April 19th,' 'Down with the National Front.' It makes us look like rebels, not common thieves. It gives us cover."

Luis took the pamphlet, the rough paper beneath his fingers, and tucked it into his jacket, the crinkle sounding like a broken promise.

"And which bank?" Pablo asked, lighting another cigarette, the smoke dissipating among the still-dripping trees. "Or which embassy?"

"Banco de Santander, on the Séptima, a few steps from the Gold Museum," Luis said, his mind already sketching the plan like a map. "Nobody hits it because it's downtown, too well watched. But that's exactly what makes it perfect. Nobody expects it."

The Séptima, with its rattling trolleybuses, its lottery vendors shouting, its hurrying office workers, was Bogotá's beating heart. The Banco de Santander stood on the iconic Carrera Séptima, between Calles 15 and 16, beside Parque Santander, across from the gleaming Afianca Building, and two blocks from the Banco de la República. Its grey façade, with tall windows reflecting the overcast sky, seemed impregnable, but Luis had studied its routines: bored guards smoking at the entrance, distracted tellers counting bills, a back door used by postmen for deliveries.

The plan took shape in a San Victorino hotel room, amid empty aguardiente bottles, overflowing ashtrays, and walls yellowed by years of smoke. They decided to disguise themselves as postmen, in uniforms

stolen from a laundromat in Paloquemao, and use stockings to cover their faces, turning their features into deformed shadows. They would take women and children hostage, chosen at random off the street, to discourage resistance. Two mail sacks, big as rice bags, would hide the loot.

But the real masterstroke—the thing that would make the police, and the whole city, look the other way—was the diversion.

"We need chaos," Luis murmured, gesturing with the empty bottle toward the window, toward the Afianca Building. "Not an alarm, not a shootout. Something so big it swallows every firefighter, every cop, every eye. Because we've already talked about this: what moves people isn't their sorrows, it's their affections."

Gil nodded, remembering the night when, deep in their cups, they had rambled on about the vengeances of Colombian history, from La Gaitana, who, rather than die at the Spanish captain's hands, watched her son murdered and answered with the bloody reprisal that made her legend. Wasn't it more cunning to challenge the greater "cat"—power itself, embodied in the police—by striking at what it claimed to protect most: its supposed children, the civilians?

They plotted an idea both simple and monstrous: a fire in Bogotá's most modern building, but not just any fire—one that would look like a national tragedy. Gil, who had briefly worked in maintenance there, knew the ducts and utility rooms of the upper floors. The key wasn't gasoline or pyrotechnics, but

creating a buildup of smoke and heat on the upper floors, with delayed ignition, so that the emergency protocols themselves would do the rest: sirens, evacuations, cameras—the entire downtown looking up. The smoke, visible from half the city, would be the perfect curtain.

On the morning of July 23, 1970, a fine drizzle dampened the Séptima's cobblestones. Luis, the stocking rolled up in his pocket, adjusted his postman's cap. At 10:58 a.m., just as they walked into the bank, a dull roar—more a deep growl than an explosion—rattled the windows of the façade. From the bank's window, a column of thick black smoke could be seen beginning to rise from the Afianca's upper floors. The skyscraper's alarms went off first; within seconds, alarms were sounding at fire stations across the city. The chaos in the street was instant: offices emptying out, passersby crowding together to stare at the sky, traffic tangled into a knot.

The robbery, Luis thought, would with luck be a mere footnote.

Just as he and his accomplices crossed the threshold of that bank, founded in honor of General Santander, bodies began falling from the burning tower's upper floors.

The crowd erupted into screams when one of them struck the ground and hit a lottery-ticket seller. The scene shattered the plaza: there was running, sobbing, and a dense silence before the sirens arrived.

Inside, it smelled of old paper and ink; ceiling fans buzzed like insects.

Luis pointed to a young woman carrying a child in her arms. Gil grabbed her by the arm, the barrel of his revolver pressing into her back.

"Don't scream," Gil whispered.

Pablo seized an elderly woman waiting in line. Seeing the stockings, the customers froze. Luis fired once into the air; the roar echoed off the marble.

"Everybody down!" he shouted. "This isn't a robbery, it's justice!"

The tellers, trembling, opened their drawers; bills fell like dry leaves. Luis filled the sacks; Gil and Pablo kept watch over the hostages.

Outside, the world had already become something else: sirens, megaphones, fans of water spraying across the avenue, the park coated in a dark powder drifting down from above. The crowd pressed against the railings to watch "the Afianca thing," and the Séptima became a bottleneck of stretchers, hoses, and onlookers. No one paid the postmen any mind.

Luis walked out the back door, the sacks over his shoulder, and dissolved into the crowd. The smoke from the buses and the shouting of the lottery vendors shielded him. Authorities scrambled in and out of the building, tripping over bystanders. The disaster had already become a media spectacle: mobile television units, antennas extended, had set up on the steps of Parque Santander, broadcasting live. The grainy footage showed the blackened façade and desperate figures leaning out through gaping openings. A body fell, and a collective scream swept the plaza.

Luis saw it too, and a shiver ran down his spine. He had orchestrated the chaos, not this intimacy of death displayed on screen. He laughed at his own cunning, convinced that those poor wretches would never even know they were dying for the wellbeing of a band of rogues; but the laugh caught in his throat when he remembered that the cameras also preserved faces.

As he mixed with the crowd on his way to his stolen Fiat, a young reporter—ridiculous jacket, microphone in hand—intercepted him. Behind him, a cameraman zoomed in, catching the soot-stained postman's uniform.

"Excuse me, sir—you're a postman," he pressed. "How long have you been here? What have you seen?"

Luis, his heart in his throat, the sacks weighing on him with the crushing weight of guilt, shrugged and avoided the lens.

"It's a national tragedy!" he lied, his voice hoarse from the smoke. "My job is to keep this building's mail safe."

"Has anyone managed to escape? Have you seen the firefighters in action?"

"Can't you interview someone who isn't working right now?" he muttered, finally breaking free and losing himself in the crowd, feeling the camera's cold gaze on his back like a second sentence.

In a cluttered apartment, Matías Argüello watched the broadcast on his Philips television: the burning façade, and that postman with the soot-streaked face, the familiar jaw, the way he shrugged.

"Luis," he muttered, his glass of whisky frozen halfway to his lips.

It was his son. His own son, orchestrating the carnage unfolding before the cameras. He laughed, proud of his son's cruelty, consoled—as every criminal is—by the thought that more men die in any given war than in the collateral fire of a masterful heist. That his son had appeared on screen as a casual witness lent the whole affair a veneer of heroism worthy of Robin Hood. But it was also lethal, involuntary publicity.

"Damn it," he roared, hurling the glass against the wall. "Turn off that camera! Get that idiot off the screen!"

Inside the bank, the young teller with the thick glasses reached for the alarm, but his cry was lost amid the symphony of sirens. Gil, furious, spun toward him.

"Long live April 19th!" he shouted, and a bullet shattered his glasses.

Blood splattered the marble. Gil and Pablo, tearing off their stockings, ran for the exit. The police, overwhelmed by the fire, had barely a pair of confused officers at the entrance. A volley of gunfire met them.

Luis, already at the corner of Calle 14, having lost the reporter, quickened his pace, his eyes stinging from the smoke. He reached the blue Fiat parked two blocks down, on Carrera Novena. He opened the trunk, threw in the sacks, and slammed it shut. An officer, his face blackened, intercepted him.

"Move along, there's a fire!" he ordered, looking up at the tower. "The Afianca's coming down!"

Luis nodded and drove off, vanishing into the chaos of diverted traffic, the sacks hidden in the trunk, a burning secret, the image of that falling body seared into his memory.

At the bank, Gil and Pablo emerged with two tellers as human shields. The police, now reinforced but jittery, surrounded them.

"Don't shoot, there are hostages!" the officer in charge ordered.

But a young man pulled the trigger. The bullet struck Pablo in the forehead. Gil, in a fit of rage, shot the teller in the leg.

"Down with the National Front!" he bellowed, as the woman collapsed.

Taking advantage of the confusion of first responders, Gil ran through the smoke and the crowd toward the Décima. He reached the agreed-upon meeting point, but Luis's Fiat wasn't there.

"You bastard!" he shouted, his voice cracking in the fume-thick air.

Seeing officers closing in, he raised his hands; the revolver fell with a metallic clatter.

"I am an opponent of this government," he declared. "What I did is no different from what Bolívar and Camilo Torres did!"

The crowd, enraged and traumatized by the fire, kicked him, pulled his hair, and pelted him with stones until a laborer struck him in the face. He fell, dazed, and was dragged away in handcuffs amid shouts of "Murderer!"

Months later, at trial, Gil remained silent. His lawyer—worn suit, fiery voice—defended him with fervor, tying the robbery to "the climate of oppression."

"This man is not a criminal," he argued. "He is a victim of the rich, of the pampered white elites who look down on the poor from Miami. And no one has proven any connection between him and the Afianca fire! He is a champion of social justice!"

The judge, attuned to the political climate, sentenced him to eight years at the Cárcel Modelo. From his cell, reeking of damp and urine, Gil sent a message through a prisoner being released:

"Tell Luis I can let the bank job go," he whispered, his resentment cold. "But the stones that are mine—he'd better look after them."

Luis, who had gone back to Bucaramanga, hid the money sacks under his mattress, in Matías's house, in the San Miguel neighborhood, its streets shaded by ceiba trees, its houses roofed in red tile.

The city, with its green parks where children played in the shade of the trees, its passersby eating *pan de yuca* at the corner lunch counters, would be his temporary refuge, a contrast to Bogotá's chaos.

Every night, lying down, Luis felt the crinkle of the bills beneath the mattress, a symbol of power that kept him awake, fearing someone would discover his secret. The weight of the money was like a chain, binding him to the guilt of the blood spilled: the policeman on Carrera 15, the teller at the bank, Pablo on the Séptima.

One afternoon, Matías came home, his face reddened by sun and aguardiente, and flung his hat to the floor, its worn brim rolling across the tiles.

"They fired me, damn it!" he shouted, kicking a chair, which teetered with a creak. "Some son of a bitch reported me for drinking on the job. As if I hadn't driven drunk for twelve years straight!"

Luis, sitting at the table, served himself a bowl of *mute* and watched him in silence, his mind still on the streets of Bogotá.

"Get the money out, son," Matías added, his voice low but firm, sitting down across from him. "We're going to buy a taxi. How else are we supposed to live?"

Luis, who knew his father was capable of throwing him out of the house, or even killing him, if he refused, got up and went to his room. He lifted the mattress, the reek of ink and sweat from the bills filling the air, and pulled out part of the loot, the crumpled bills like dry leaves. He counted out what was needed, each bill a reminder of the blood it had cost, and handed it to Matías.

They bought a 1971 Ford Custom 500 taxi, its bodywork black and chrome, its roof white and trimmed with metal rails. *El Cucal*, as Matías named it, stood out on the streets of Bucaramanga: the engine so quiet, so dashing, Luis said, invoking the only book he'd ever read in elementary school—*El convidado de piedra*, by Tirso de Molina—like Don Juan on his steed from the Spanish Golden Age of letters, gallant with the ladies, dressed in a black suit and white ruffled collar.

The most expensive part was the taxi registration fee, which consumed the entirety of Luis's share of the loot, since he always insisted his cut should be not a third of the haul, but half. After a while, Matías grew sick of living not off a salary but off individual fares, and declared that in Bucaramanga, driving a taxi wasn't enough to survive on. Unlike Bogotá, which used taximeters, fares in Bucaramanga were short, and passengers often treated him like a servant. Him, who had once held the life and death of entire towns in his hands, as an employee of Laureano Gómez's government!

Every repeated order was, for Matías, a constant reminder of his own precariousness.

Postponing the vendetta he held against David Saint-André, whose family he harassed with his rounds through the Diamante neighborhood, Matías announced to his son that he had canceled their lease.

"We're going back to Bogotá," he said one night in the living room, cleaning his Colt revolver, the fan buzzing like a trapped insect.

"One more bank, Papá?" Luis asked.

"A big one," Matías nodded slowly, a bottle of aguardiente in hand, his eyes glassy, "and then we retire."

"I already have an idea," Luis exclaimed. "The Banco Alianza! They're accused of swindling the elderly with expensive retirement policies for anyone who reaches eighty. In the end, they come out with round bellies and only give the poor souls a pittance."

"Plan it well, son," he said, his voice heavy with weariness. "Like I taught you. But don't leave any loose ends."

Luis nodded and fell silent for a few seconds, weighing the distance between what had been said and what was still to come. They moved to Bogotá and, without a shred of scruple, invested the portion of the loot that wasn't rightfully theirs; they rented an apartment in a clean, recently built red-brick block in the Fontibón neighborhood, a few blocks from El Dorado Airport. From the balcony one could see a fried-food stand with a hand-painted sign reading "The Palace of Cholesterol," and the nearby walls were smeared with revolutionary graffiti.

Matías drove a taxi for several months. Between traffic lights and passengers chattering about their daily lives, he even came to consider—if only for a while—living an honest life. They kept a running tally: from the loot, they still owed Gil his share, to be handed over in 1978, when his sentence ended. That outstanding debt weighed on their conversations, and on the silences shared between father and son.

News from the Presidential Palace chilled their blood. Gil had been released under a political amnesty decreed by President Alfonso López Michelsen. The Cárcel Modelo opened its doors, and rumors spread like wildfire: Gil, already back on the streets, had reportedly joined an organization with tentacles in San Victorino, in Paloquemao, and in the taverns of Carrera Quinta. His phrase—"the stones that are mine"—echoed in

Luis's mind like a threat wrapped in a sentence, an echo of the debts still hunting him down.

That afternoon, the apartment's phone rang. The ring cut through the stillness.

"Don't answer it!" Matías shouted from the kitchen, without looking up. "Who could that be at this hour?"

Luis picked up the receiver, his voice tense.

"Hello?" he said. His self-assurance cracked for an instant into pale shock. "Yes… Listen: my father and I invested part of his cut in a taxi for a new score. Would you… want in? No, listen to me: I'm not going to abandon you this time. I never did. A policeman pulled me out of there! His words came out in a rush, as though he were trying to justify himself and make a promise all at once. Listen!"

The urgency of the call brought fear into their home. Fearing reprisals, and aware their trail was running too hot, they decided to leave the city: forty-eight hours to prepare their escape.

That night they bid farewell to the capital with a deliberate drunkenness. They went to a tavern on Carrera Quinta, where the clink of beer bottles mixed with a cumbia band's playing. Between packed tables and half-empty glasses, two prostitutes in tight dresses and shrill laughter joined their table, their painted nails gleaming under the dim light like tiny flags. They spent more of the Banco de Santander's money on aguardiente, toasts, half an hour with the women in a back room, and empty promises. The money went up like the smoke of the cigarettes Pablo no longer

smoked—a name that hung between them, unexplained.

At dawn they returned to the building: the red-brick block, neat and silent. No sooner had they crossed the street than an explosion tore through the air. The windows burst in a rain of glass; flames licked at the curtains; the roar rang in their ears. The smell of gas mixed with the screams of the injured; ash and rubble filled the street. Beneath their boots, the shattered glass crunched.

"They wanted us dead!" Matías shouted, pulling Luis by the arm with the urgency of a man dragging along with him the sheer will to survive.

They ran without looking back, jumped into the taxi, and fled down the highway. The engine roared like a wounded animal. The eastern hills faded into the morning mist as they left Bogotá behind.

At dawn they reached Tunja. Exhausted, they sought out the Telecom office. The cold of the main plaza seeped into the building's high hallways, where people stood in line, wrinkled papers in hand. Luis wrote Asdrúbal's number on a form and slid it under the operator's window. She barely glanced at him, took the paper, and disappeared among the cables and switchboards.

The wait was tense. Luis sat on a wooden bench, Matías smoking silently beside him. After a few minutes, a woman's voice rang out from the counter:

"Luis! Booth eight!"

Luis stood abruptly and walked to the assigned booth. The heavy black phone, dialless, was already

connected. He picked up the receiver and, after a second of metallic static on the line, heard breathing on the other end.

"Asdrúbal… I need you to find us a place," he said, in a low voice, as though someone might still be listening. "A big house, with a garage, untraceable. If possible, in one of the squatter settlements up north. Somewhere nobody will bother us."

The silence that followed was brief, weighted with the understanding of someone who grasps urgency without needing an explanation. Luis hung up slowly, with the bitter certainty that his friend would take care of it.

They arrived in Bucaramanga breathless, the map of their fear still fresh. The city welcomed them with its green parks, children at play, and corner newsstands piled with newspapers and magazines announcing their crime. Luis knew they couldn't sit still: Gil's warning was a shadow that reached everywhere.

At their new hideout, while a fan turned slowly in the dining room, someone knocked at the door. In walked Asdrúbal: medium height, curly-haired, his hair long and almost feminine, cat-like eyes that always seemed half-closed in a silent mockery. He walked with the familiarity of someone who never asks permission, and the confidence of someone who always has a backup route. He had been Luis's close friend since childhood, his accomplice in robberies and extortion.

Together they remembered the times they'd gone to the Diamante neighborhood to intimidate the son of David Saint-André, the man responsible for

getting Matías fired from his post as a driver at the Agustín Codazzi Institute. These weren't mere bravado: it was a score that had to be settled, just as Gil wanted to settle his own. In the underworld, no one gets away clean.

They laughed too over another anecdote: the time they'd become almost famous in certain circles, stealing two motorcycles parked outside a Yamaha dealership. They'd made off with them so smoothly the owners didn't even notice until much later. It was a quick, clean job, and it made the rounds as a shining example of shameless daring.

Matías watched them with the mix of sternness and affection typical of a hardened man. He let them talk, let them reminisce, and only then cut in, his voice firm.

"There's no need to run in cases like this. What we should be planning is a quiet life, and once Gil finds us, a truce—a false peace that will really be a carefully laid ambush. Gil might think he's clever, but he's still nothing but a *gil*—a sucker."

Father, son, and accomplice laughed at the irony of the pun on their enemy's Galician-sounding name. The laughter was brief, dense; a parenthesis against the tension.

For now, they decided the three of them would share the taxi, rent an apartment under false papers, and wait beneath a white flag: an appearance of peace, letting them move without raising suspicion.

"If you run into him, you talk to him like he's your best friend," Matías ordered. "Tell him I had a

buried treasure, a gold and emerald pre-Columbian idol I found buried in my backyard, and that we'll gladly give him his share. I know the soul of every bandit; he'll take the bait."

"And the trip back to El Diamante?" Asdrúbal asked, his eyes glassy at the prospect of strangling that boy with the huge, innocent eyes.

"We'll use them as bait," Matías muttered, his eyes suddenly sinister. "But let's not get ahead of ourselves."

Asdrúbal began to laugh, timidly at first; Luis joined in more forcefully, and finally the three of them broke into a macabre, torturous, sinister cackle.

Matías picked up a chessboard and set the pieces in place with the methodical calm of a man arranging an intrigue that lay beyond good and evil.

Chapter 2. The Primordial Light

The sun over Barbosa poured down on the farms of Santander like an ancient light, the kind that, in Greek tragedy—in Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, where the Titan steals divine fire, sets himself apart from the treachery of his brothers for the sake of a humanity that history has shown does not deserve it, and is chained by a Zeus whose justice may be cosmic order or celestial tyranny—seemed less to illuminate than to interrogate, as though the sky itself, weary of bearing witness to the fall of men, bent down to whisper:

Why, O creatures, have you chosen chaos over eternal order?

It was 1973, and the red dust of the highway clung to the soles of shoes like the primordial debts the human soul has dragged since Eden, embedded in the clay of creation. David, my father, worked as a surveyor for the Agustín Codazzi Geographic Institute, IGAC, a vast bureaucratic machine erected in 1935 from the embers of Spanish colonial cartography, when the country, still reeling from the wars of independence and the revolts of the nineteenth century, sought to measure its own contours to stop the bleeding of its internal borders.

The land registry had been formalized in the forties as a bulwark against the anarchic distribution of land that had unleashed the Violence of the thirties, that dormant civil war in which Liberals and Conservatives devoured one another in the countryside, leaving orphaned farms and wandering souls in their wake.

David was arguing with Matías at the wheel of the Jeep Willys, that rough-hewn workhorse of the national institutions. Its fleet, renewed in the sixties, let surveyors like him cross jungles and high plains, drawing boundary lines that turned rivers into eternal disputes and cleared forests into great estates.

The Willys jeeps adorned the roads, announcing modernity with their smell of gasoline and coffee, since coffee growers had made it their favorite, importing hundreds of these militarized green jeeps in the fifties and sixties.

Matías, the driver and an old acquaintance of David's from the shadows of San Gil—where the estates of the twenties had risen like Towers of Babel over the sweat of laborers who died of fevers and broken promises—reeked of stale aguardiente and that resentment that ferments in forgotten cantinas, where men drink not to forget, but to measure the depth of their own fall.

"You're drunk again, Matías. The white line isn't there for you to piss on," David snapped, his voice as dry as the crack of a falsified land title, adjusting the rearview mirror as though measuring the soul of a swindled man. "Better if I drive."

"I piss wherever my body damn well tells me to, and neither you nor anybody else is going to tell me how to drive today!"

Matías—Old Matías, as they whispered in the slums—straightened in his seat. He was a stooped sixty-something, his scars dating back to the fifties, when he had been one of the *chulavitas*, those rabid dogs of the Conservative Party that Laureano Gómez unleashed against the Liberals. The *chulavitas*, born in the harsh sierras of Chiquinquirá around 1948, were the very embodiment of systematic evil.

Matías had been among the worst: an executioner with machete and rifle, leaving towns in flames. His nickname, whispered between 1948 and 1958, was synonymous with massacre. Rojas Pinilla's peace pushed him into the shadows: he ended up a driver for the land registry, measuring—with hands still stained—the very lands he had once watered with blood.

To understand the tension of that trip, one has to go back to the night before, in Barbosa, when everything began to unravel. My father was not the villain Matías's rage painted him to be. In the seventies, in Santander, his work was meticulous, almost monastic: verifying the true extent of properties against aged deeds—colonial inheritances handed out like royal grants—that, over the decades, had been upended by violence and displacement. Not so much in the Santander of that era, relatively calm by then, but in the memory of the elders, who still remembered farms won at gunpoint or by machete.

David appraised those properties using national averages that rarely reflected local reality: fertile Magdalena soil could be worth ten times more than a barren plot in the mountains, yet the land registry equalized them into cold figures for tax purposes. It was an attempt to bring order to chaos, and, at the same time, a trigger for misunderstandings: the large landholders feared losing "phantom" hectares inflated on paper; the smallholders were wary of new taxes; and the squatters with no title at all saw the surveyor as an emissary of the State, one who measured not land, but destinies.

David navigated those waters with patience, understanding both the landowner defending his legacy and the laborer dreaming of a plot of his own. But Matías, in open defiance of the order to keep his distance from the locals, had become entangled with the daughter of a smallholder: a girl with fierce eyes and calloused hands who washed clothes in the river. The romance, a whirlwind against the town's norms, unleashed the fury of her father—a proud widower who recognized in the old *chulavita* the demon of his own past—who gathered his neighbors and, torches in hand, threatened to burn down the inn where Matías had been sleeping.

Alerted by a breathless messenger, David arrived in the Jeep. He found Matías barricaded behind overturned tables in the dining room, revolver in hand, his face marked not only by wrinkles but by the weight of a plainly fleeting love and a reputation shattered to pieces.

"Get out of there, you crazy old man! What have you done?" David shouted, leaping from the vehicle, his own .38 raised toward the sky, a peaceful sign of loyalty to his companion, assuming the old man had sought to redeem his *chulavita* past through a romance the town would never forgive.

The mob advanced, torches blazing like final judgments, the girl's father at the front, shouting for vengeance over her sullied honor. David and Matías, back to back behind the barricaded tables, fired into the air—blasts that tore through the night like the thunderbolts of Zeus; the smoke rose like an offering to a precarious peace. The mob retreated, not out of cowardice, but from the confusion of bullets that might have been meant for them, and the father, panting, withdrew with a promise of reprisal that only polished the tarnished dignity of a daughter dishonored by a man who could well have been her father.

Matías, with the girl safe in a back room, looked at David with eyes that mixed gratitude and guilt.

"I did it for her, boss. Her father used to beat her, and, with the money I gave her, she's leaving for Bucaramanga tonight."

David, reloading his revolver, nodded, understanding the old man's point of view—a man who had spilled blood for ideals and who, on the strength of his resemblance to Gary Cooper, spent his wages sending battered maidens off to the city— but knowing that the events of that night had planted the seed of the wrath now blooming, on the road, into a drawn revolver.

The girl, her face pale but resolute, emerged from the room, her hands trembling as she touched Matías's arm: a touch of tenderness that eased the scandal she had just unleashed. David, ever the mediator, calmed the innkeeper with a few extra bills for the trouble, recognizing that the prosperity of her business depended on quiet, not on scandals and gunfire.

Outside, the Jeep Willys waited, engine rumbling, and in the back, two figures who completed that day's crew: old Rueda, a survey engineer with impeccable manners and an unhurried voice, a man in his fifties who spoke to David only to invite him fishing on the Sogamoso River or up in the Berlín páramo, where they'd come back with dorado, bocachico, catfish, and silver trout, which they grilled over charcoal in their own patios, trading stories of past surveys without a trace of bitterness; Rueda saw in fishing a counterweight that balanced the obsessive precision of his work.

Beside him sat Denisito, a consummate cheapskate in his twenties, with eyes that calculated every peso as though it were a disputed boundary line; he had been spared the ruckus and the warning shots by staying not at the inn but at a discreet brothel in Barbosa's red-light district, where, in his eagerness to save money, he had haggled the price down to the bone, only to have his clothes stolen at dawn—wallet, shirt, trousers, even his socks—leaving him wrapped in a threadbare sheet.

David, doubled over laughing at Denisito's stinginess, had to go at dawn to lend him a change of clothes from his own bag. He joked as he handed over the wrinkled shirt:

"Cheap comes at a price, Denisito. Next time, pay for a decent lock."

Denisito, blushing but not entirely repentant, muttered:

"No! They stole my clothes while I slept next to a fishing rod, because my room didn't have walls—just folding screens!"

David burst out laughing then, just as he had while telling Rueda and Matías the story, a source of hilarity that endeared him to the crew, though his habit of asking for a discount on full restaurant menus remained exasperating, inevitably asking how much they'd charge him without the soup.

Now, that night in Barbosa, Rueda and Denisito had arrived, alerted by the commotion: Rueda with his notebook in hand, as though measuring not the mob but the angle of the torches; and Denisito counting imaginary coins to cover possible damages to the inn. David, still breathless from the adrenaline, explained the whole mess to them in a low voice while Matías calmed the girl in her room.

"Matías crossed the line," David said. "He went against my orders, and now this. But I got him out of trouble."

Rueda, adjusting his glasses with impeccable manners, nodded without judgment.

"We all have our Waterloo, David. This Saturday we'll go fishing, and the water will wash this scare away," he said; his usual invitation was a balm, shaped by his practice of yoga and Buddhism, since what he loved most about fishing wasn't the catch, sometimes meager, but the stillness of his own being before nature's silence, an experience that, he repeated, balanced out life's human ups and downs.

Denisito, glancing nervously at the retreating torches, counted under his breath:

"At least they didn't burn the Jeep. That would have brought a full investigation down on us. Everyone would have found out about my clothes getting stolen!"

David laughed quietly and patted his shoulder; their camaraderie dissolved the tension.

Back in the Jeep, Matías took the wheel again, insisting on his right to drive; the aguardiente still clouded his judgment, but not his pride. David sat beside him; Rueda and Denisito, in the back. The engine started with a roar that seemed to protest the turbulent night. The road wound uphill, Barbosa's lights fading in the rearview mirror like dissolving memories.

David watched Matías swerve, the Jeep leaning dangerously into the curves, dust rising like a veil over the road. The danger was plain, and it threatened everyone: Rueda, with his fisherman's calm, already planning the next trout up in the páramo; Denisito, mentally tallying the cost of an accident that would wreck his budget; and David himself, who calculated that they had a seventy-percent chance of crashing. He

felt the weight of responsibility: the crew's safety threatened by Matías's drunkenness.

"Stop, Matías," David said, his voice firm but not aggressive. "You're putting everyone at risk. Rueda, Denisito, me. It's not just about your pride."

Matías gripped the wheel harder; the Jeep lurched, its axles groaning.

"I'm the driver, boss. You measure land; I drive. Nobody tells me how."

The Jeep tilted on a curve; the wheels skidded on the loose dust, and David saw death waiting in the abyss beside them—a black ravine that swallowed cars like the river Styx. In one swift motion, he reached for the glove compartment, but Matías was faster: he pulled out his rusted revolver, its barrel aimed at David's chest, his thumb trembling on the hammer with the fury of a wounded drunk.

"You measure everything with your theodolites, boss, but you can't measure the weight of an old heart that's just said goodbye to a fleeting love," Matías growled; his voice was a hoarse echo of the night before, when his romance with the girl had been his belated blessing, now twisted by his reconciliation with her aggressive father.

The air thickened; the dust spiraled up in a capricious swirl— a gust David had no reason to notice on those dry hillsides, except that danger had sharpened every one of his senses—and Matías's weapon tilted a fatal degree, sparing the fabric of his shirt and the heartbeat beneath it. David didn't blink; his hand, hardened on farms where laborers died of fevers and

promissory notes, sprang forward with the reflex of a hunting hound and disarmed Matías with a twist that cracked like a debtor's bone. The revolver landed in his palm and, calmly, he opened the cylinder, tossing the bullets onto the road's dust: six cartridges rolling away like lost marbles, a gesture that dissolved the threat of his being killed—or of having to kill his adversary. He tucked the empty weapon into his bag, alongside the maps and theodolites, a gesture both practical and symbolic.

"You're finished, Matías. Tomorrow I send the memo to IGAC's board. You're fired. You can go measure your own shadows with that rusted machete from the fifties."

David stepped on the gas, taking the wheel himself; the Jeep straightened with a firm roar. Matías, disarmed and furious, sank into his seat, muttering curses. David, without looking back, held out his own .38—the one he'd used at the inn—toward the back.

"Rueda, take this. Keep it trained on him until Bucaramanga. Don't let your guard down, for everyone's sake."

Rueda, with his impeccable manners and the calm of his Buddhist studies now put into practice, took the revolver without hesitation, aiming at Matías with the precision of an engineer who has studied weights and balances.

"Easy, Matías," Rueda said, his voice serene as a stream's water. "Time washes away these resentments. But for now, sit still, and the whole crew will thank you for it."

Denisito, in the back, let out a nervous laugh, mentally tallying the cost of the night, wondering whether he should have canceled the whole day for the scant three hours he'd slept in his room.

"Anger comes at a price, doesn't it, Matías?" he dared to provoke the old *chulavita*, like a child taunting a caged jaguar.

"At least I'm not wearing borrowed clothes," Matías growled, but Rueda's aimed barrel kept him from unleashing the insult already forming on his tongue.

The road back to Bucaramanga passed in a tense silence, broken only by the Jeep's rattling and the occasional optimistic remark from Rueda about the nation's future—the best remedy, he liked to say, quoting self-help books he read on his fishing trips, against life's daily uncertainties.

David drove with steady hands, measuring not only the road but the crew's equilibrium: Rueda, sidestepping the tense silences, told a few stories about his student adventures in Bogotá, when, after learning to play the accordion, he'd won over girls playing vallenatos at end-of-semester parties. Denisito, with his dry humor, kept mourning the loss of his clothes, money, and belongings; he kept joking that the thousands of pesos he had saved over six years of sleeping in cheap brothels more than made up for the previous night's loss. In the end, he had to endure David's teasing, who prophesied eternal fame for his misadventure.

They reached Bucaramanga at dawn; the Jeep pulled up in front of the IGAC office, a concrete building on Carrera 36 whose modern architecture reflected the nation's optimism.

Getting out, Matías jumped down with one last growl, but there, in the shadows of the side street, two figures waited: Luis, his son, with bulging emerald-green eyes, and Asdrúbal, his childhood friend from the Zapamanga neighborhood; both known thieves, their gazes as sullen as knife-scarred alleyways, eyes that smell blood before they smell fear.

As my father recounted his adventure on our way back from my grandmother Elvia's house in the Mutis neighborhood to our apartment in La Victoria, the Jeep's smell of burnt gasoline plunged me suddenly into my own memories, as though into a mirror of my own adventures.

All calm is a deception, I told myself, noticing the nervousness in my father's voice, a light that dims and drops us into uncertainty. And in that uncertainty, my mind drifted back.

My own drama does not begin in Barbosa, but earlier, in the pure white of my first memory, laughter and words I heard from within my mother's womb, until a pain so unbearable forced me to be born in a gleaming clinic in Bucaramanga, La Merced, where nothingness covered every surface amid congratulatory laughter and voices that sounded like broken promises.

"It's a Red Snapper," I heard someone say.

What I had been floated between the waters, weightless, timeless, illuminated—as it would again,

decades later, in the waters of the Gulf of Morrosquillo—suspended in a limbo Böhme would later explain to me in a musty library in Manchester, where the ethereal realms are capriciously abandoned for the death rattle, the suffering, the anguish of leaving behind the Creator's grace.

The first color I remember after white—if white can even be called a color—was the metallic grey of the enormous tubes on the gurneys, in a clinic that dissolved from brightness into shadow without hurting the pupils of a creature freshly emerged from nothingness.

My second memory was the soft carmine of my mother, suspended alongside her immense smile, still snow-white as an uncracked dream, her skin smooth and radiant.

Slowly, with the first discomforts, the other colors emerged, down to the black of the night, a ravine toward the Styx into which I was cast like a specter.

My first night, thus begotten, seemed eternal, the opposite of the paradise my mother's womb had been, the first sensation that I was no longer the whole within God, but an individual, a being, a child, the firstborn of David and Adelia.

He, David Saint-André, whose surname recovered the Gallic root—the French one—of the Santanders, embodied the crossing of two inheritances: the enlightened reason of Gaul and the telluric passion of these Andean mountains. In my novels, that lineage has been transformed by a literary convention that sets us apart from real characters: fictional beings who,

being no less true, inhabit a parallel world, perhaps more lucid than the one the social sciences attempt to describe.

In the family story, the Saint-Andrés remain an old and distinguished line. The name of Francisco de Paula Santander, our symbolic ancestor, still shines among the shadows of history: hero and heretic, legislator and conspirator, exalted by some for his republican faith and condemned by others for having curbed Bolívar's imperial dreams. During his government (1832–1837), he reorganized the Republic of New Granada after the dissolution of Gran Colombia, founded schools and universities, established the Supreme Court, and normalized public finances. He was also—and few remember this—the only ruler who paid off the foreign debt inherited from the wars of independence, that immense burden that had financed Bolívar's own liberating campaigns. Everything the Liberator requested from his battle fronts, Santander sent: weapons, uniforms, provisions, wages, and even the loans taken out in London to keep the cause of emancipation alive.

They called him "the Man of Laws," not only for his insistence on subjecting military power to civilian authority, but because he believed a republic had to rest on education and law, not on the sword or the cult of the strongman. Reading Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, I came to understand that, just as the Greek moralist justified Marcus Brutus for having opposed Caesar's tyranny, so too did later historians vindicate Santander, justifying his fierce opposition to Bolívar as a defense of

republican principle against the temptation of redemptive despotism.

That reading changed my view of the general forever. I saw then that his figure, so attacked by certain ideologues, had been distorted by those who worship tyrants under the guise of "the people." In my family's view, Latin American communisms inherited the syndicalist doctrines of Mussolini, the national socialism of Hitler, and the absolute collectivism of Stalin, shielding themselves behind the theory of the "dictatorship of the people," which is nothing more than the very ideology of Julius Caesar: power concentrated in a single man in the name of everyone.

Santander, by contrast, believed in law as a form of freedom, in education as the foundation of order, and in the republic as a pact among equals before justice. That is why my family still says, with a certain pride, that while Bolívar dreamed of empires, Santander built schools, and that if one founded nations, the other gave them a legal soul.

And it is not for nothing that people in Charalá still murmur that the Santanders are saints, madmen, or poets—for only a saint could have renounced absolute power, only a madman could believe it possible to govern with justice, and only a poet could imagine that honesty and law might themselves be another form of love.

My father kept, as the greatest of our treasures, a tin box lined in blue velvet, holding the family's genealogical tree, typed out by my great-grandfather Pedro. That yellowed sheet was a compendium of

warriors, saints, and feudal lords who, according to tradition, had once owned entire cities: Santa Marta, Pamplona, and the valleys of the Chicamocha, where stories of their dominion are still told.

My father used to say that lineage had been confirmed by an episode that marked our family: what happened to my great-uncle Víctor Santander on his first day as a law student in Bogotá. Dressed in an immaculate English wool suit—out of fashion, but dignified—he became the target of the *rolos*' mockery, who ridiculed him for his provincial elegance. Noticing his discomfort, Father Félix Restrepo, S.J., asked him to stand, and, in a commanding voice, added before his classmates:

"Don't be embarrassed, young man. That suit you're wearing is older than every code of law we'll study here. Your family doesn't only come from Santander: your ancestors were Templar knights, guardians of an ancient oath."

According to that priest—or according to what my great-uncle Víctor told me in his cluttered library in the La Castellana neighborhood of Bogotá—the Saint-Andrés, or Santanders, had been Templar knights who fled to France after the fall of Jerusalem, and later emigrated to the Iberian Peninsula, where they adopted the name Santander upon founding—or at least naming—the Cantabrian city.

Years later, reviewing the historical documents, I learned that story was as dubious as it was fascinating: the name Santander comes, according to scholars, from the Latin *Sancti Emeterii*, honoring the martyrs

Emeterius and Celedonius, two soldiers of the Legio VII Gemina who, around 298 A.D., were arrested in Calagurris—present-day Calahorra—for refusing to sacrifice to the gods of the Empire. After lengthy torture, they were beheaded on the banks of the Cidacos River.

Tradition holds that their bodies were thrown into the sea, and that the currents miraculously carried them to the shores of northern Spain, where the first Christians built a sanctuary atop the cliff. That place was named *Portus Sancti Emeterii*, "the port of Saint Emeterius," which, over the centuries, gradually evolved in popular speech into Sant Ander, and from there into Santander.

But the more I read about those saints, the more I found myself drawn to the idea that historical truth does not exclude legend. From there was born my own reconciling thesis: that the *Sancti Emeterii* of Christian devotion became confused with the Saint-André of the exiled knights, the Templars who, fleeing the persecution of Philip the Fair in 1307, landed at those same northern ports with part of their treasure and bought up broad tracts of land to hide themselves under new names. Those fiefdoms began to be known as the domains of Saint-André, and, coexisting alongside the martyr's sanctuary, the two names—one Latin, one French—blended into a single hybrid name: Sant-Ander, half sacred, half chivalric.

My thesis is that the name Santander derives neither from a saint alone nor from a knight alone, but from the mystical fusion of both: from the soldier who

dies for his faith, and the warrior who lives to protect it. I inferred that this double lineage—martyr and knight, cross and sword—was the metaphor for our own Santandereano calling: obedient to God and rebellious against the State, spiritual and combative, faithful to sacred duty and unyielding before tyrannies.

That is why, when my father pronounced the surname with the solemnity of one naming an oath, I understood that history and legend complement one another in every biography, the way soul and body do. Since then I have believed there is no genealogy more genuine than one bold enough to treasure—or even to invent—its own myths: one that fuses imagination with reality, divine inspiration with historical inquiry.

Our Creole genealogy, for its part, dates back to the days when three brothers set sail from the city of Santander, in Cantabria, following the banners of Castile toward the New World: one went to Peru with Pizarro; another, to New Spain; and the third—our ancestor—arrived in the Muisca highlands, where, to avoid a war, he took as his wife the princess of Sogamoso, heir of the *zaques* of the Sun.

Thus, between the real and the imagined, between our European inheritance and our Muisca lineage, between the right to colonize and the myth of a lost paradise, the Saint-Andrés—or the Santanders—fight throughout the world in the army of God, dreaming of establishing His kingdom for the well-being of all humanity, even as they defy the windmills of state corruption.

From that union, half conquest and half sacred pact, was born the ambivalent blood running through our veins: a mixture of knight and *cacica*, of conqueror and seductress, of sword and surrender. The Santanders—and, in their apocryphal branch, the Saint-Andrés—considered themselves heirs of that alliance uniting European order with the solar memory of the Chibcha. Within the folds of that box slept faded portraits of men in military coats, thick moustaches, statue-like stares; documents from the Cabildo of Santa Marta, licenses of nobility granted by the Crown, and even the biography of a saint said to have been assaulted by the devil. David used to show me those documents, which he adorned with old banknotes from Colombia's federal republic—a valuable collection one of his relatives would go on to steal from him years later—as though it were a moral testament, and, in the afternoons, he dreamed of restoring the lost pedigree through science and cartography, rigorously measuring the very lands his ancestors had once dominated by force.

And that was indeed the case, for my father's family had lost its farms and textile factories, its spare-parts shops, and had fallen, if not into outright misery, then into that economy of survival that is the rule in Colombia, and in the world. Our decline was so evident that one afternoon I overheard the shopkeeper, Don Ernesto, who hadn't noticed my presence, tell Don Bautista, while weighing out a pound of rice:

"That's true, the Saint-Andrés are old family, but fallen on hard times… because the rich live up in

Cabecera del Llano, in enormous houses, and are regular members of the Club del Cañón."

That remark, tossed off with the indifference of habit, was a revelation to me: that family myths, however noble, end up having their truth measured by the shopkeeper's voice. And that only wealth preserves, or grants, pedigree in a nation that no longer takes stock of the merits of its founding fathers or ancestors.

My mother, Adelia, by contrast, came from the common people, from a darker, more telluric root: daughter of illiterate peasants who had survived droughts and wars, rising socially through the sheer force of her beauty. She was tall, with fine features, an inheritance from those Galicians and Teutons who, according to family lore, had accompanied Ambrosio Alfinger in the sixteenth century, when the German adventurer crossed the Middle Magdalena with his band of mercenaries.

Her face was compared to that of TV presenter Margarita Vidal, or to Sophia Loren in *El Cid*, a Spanish princess, though her skin was fairer and her temperament—proud and quiet—recalled that of the women of the high plains, those who still carried the fire of the Sun in their eyes.

Years later, Mr. Rueda would tell me that my father, whom everyone praised for his movie-star bearing, had decided to marry a beautiful, home-loving woman. Convinced he would never find such a woman in Bucaramanga, he took advantage of his trips to the towns he was sent to as a land registry surveyor, asking at the local inns who was the most beautiful woman in

the area. If his intentions made any headway, he would introduce himself, and, feeling his affections returned, would go to the appliance store to buy a brand-new washing machine, then all the rage as the latest invention in domestic modernity. With that dowry, he would propose marriage. Twice he had failed—in Suaita and in Capitanejo—but the third time, in Barichara, he had triumphed, with my mother.

But Adelia hid her own drama. Her true love had been Rodrigo Jiménez, son of the local strongman, who had declared his affection for her since her adolescence, when he recited poems to the Virgin and was the favorite of the Capuchin Tertiary Sisters, then in charge of Barichara's Normal School for Young Ladies. Heartbreak came when Rodrigo's parents forced him to marry the daughter of another landowner from nearby Cabrera. Unable to renounce his vows of eternal love, Rodrigo got drunk one night and threw a party in the town square with two prostitutes. That outrage scandalized the quiet community and made him unworthy—in everyone's eyes, and above all in the eyes of my grandparents, Nonita and Papá Cándido—of my mother's hand. With that premeditated excess, Rodrigo had denigrated his own gallantry before the whole town, an act equivalent to moral exile, one that released Adelia from her promises and allowed her to marry another man, an outsider, without objection or pleading.

According to family lore, when my birth was announced, everyone expected a child with light-blue eyes, like the great-grandfather from Barichara pictured in his Conservative uniform after his victory at

Palonegro, and with blond hair, like grandfather Jonás, a celebrated entrepreneur who died at thirty-six for carrying on an extramarital affair. Relatives on both sides waited for the mercantile genius who would recover, or hand over, the family fortune, never once entertaining the possibility that, amid such a mixture of blood, misfortunes, and passions, God—or destiny's mysterious logic—might instead send a different sort of child: a prophet or a poet, one who would sing of their struggles and misfortunes, like Homer, or teach the richness of the most ignored objects and beings, like Dickinson.

So God, for the believer—or destiny, for the agnostic—ironic and true to form, twisted the inheritance: I was born dark-skinned, with copper skin and black hair.

"A redskin," the doctor said, with a smile that aimed for humor and barely concealed prejudice, "a red snapper."

My mother received me with a mixture of disenchantment and love, looking at me as one who recognizes a secret she had always suspected: that beneath the lofty names and gilded genealogies slept an older, deeper lineage, one that came from primitive Colombia, from the waters of the Sogamoso, and from the silent pact between a captain and an indigenous princess.

My grandmother Elvia, too, claimed in me the legacy of her father, my great-grandfather Olimpo, whom I never met, but whose portrait, showing his Hindu ancestry, hung on the wall of my great-

grandmother Caridad's room; heir, it was said, of laborers from Hindustan who had escaped British indentured servitude in Guyana, crossing Venezuela in the mid-nineteenth century.

But my grandmother's remark was not praise; it was a reproach. She herself was dark-skinned, and more than once I heard her lament not having inherited her grandfather's Castilian features, but her father's copper skin instead. When my father, her firstborn, was born, her first act was to take him to a stream and scrub him with lye soap.

"I don't want you to turn out like your grandfather!" she told him, weeping. "I want you to be blond, like your father!"

My father, always with some money in his pocket thanks to his thrift and prudence, never suffered the discrimination that would go on to plague Aunt Jazmín, the only one of the twelve children in the family, besides him, born with copper skin. The others, to her great relief, were born fair-skinned, and three of them even blond, like their father, my grandfather Jonás.

At her own wedding, my mother had already felt the sting of my younger aunts' irony, who—with the rebelliousness of adolescence and still smarting from the loss of a brother who had once bought them dresses and paid their school fees—wasted no time showing her their disdain. They told her, with that light cruelty of those who don't realize they wound, that they had expected a better match for David, and that they didn't

understand what spell she had cast on him to make him marry her.

My mother, ever courteous, stayed silent; but she heard them laughing afterward, murmuring, between giggles, the refrain of the folk song about the country girl from Santander, sweet as ripe fruit, alluding to her parents' humble trade, known to everyone in town.

That adolescent recklessness left a blister on my mother's soul. They, daughters of a father with haciendas and businesses, had not yet tasted the vile fruit of humiliation.

One afternoon, as I sat sadly watching the rain through my window, she told me I shouldn't feel sorrowful, but grateful: having a roof to shelter under was a blessing I ought to appreciate. She told me how, at six years old, she had gone with her father to the estate of the region's strongman, Don Lactancio Jiménez, so he could be paid his share of the tobacco harvest he himself had grown, gathered, and hung to dry in his own shed; and which my grandmother, along with her children, had dried and pressed flat. He would receive only ten percent of whatever Don Lactancio earned selling it to Coltabaco, since the cultivated land belonged to him.

Arriving, they were not well received: the strongman's laborers made them wait outside, by the entrance gate, on a bare, dusty road. The rain began to fall, and my grandfather Cándido covered my mother with his raw cotton shirt, leaving his own torso bare so she wouldn't get wet, since there was no tree to shelter under outside the fence; inside, the garden was thick

with lush mango, guama, and birch trees, natural guardians of that colonial estate, rising as high as twelve meters.

"Could we wait in the garden?" my grandfather shouted to a laborer sheltering in the cabin by the entrance, a young man whose face was scarred by smallpox. "Under that mango tree?"

The boy signaled that he'd ask; he covered himself with a banana leaf and went into the estate, keeping pace with the thunder tearing across the sky. When he came back, he told my grandfather that the boss had given orders that everyone waiting outside should either stay there, or come back the next day.

My grandfather had no choice but to nod, resigned, and the strongman's guards, moved to pity at the sight of my mother trembling beneath a soaked cotton shirt, handed them a few banana leaves. The two of them stood there, embracing, for several hours, while the storm raged on, until they were told that Don Lactancio could not receive them that day, but the next.

That night, my grandfather and my mother came down with fevers that kept them bedridden for two days.

"Sometimes my father had to wait a whole month before they'd pay him his tithe," she told me, tormented by her own memories.

Her wound ran deeper still, for she had accepted that my father would keep handing over half his salary to his mother and sisters, a stipend he had honored ever since taking up his government job, eight years earlier.

Her redress came with my birth, when she announced she would give up her own work to raise me. That gave my father the perfect argument to inform his mother that, from then on, he could no longer give her his monthly allowance. Neither his sisters' tears nor their tantrums did any good: my mother had forced him to choose between them or us.

That was the beginning of a distance that, over the years, became an abyss: the families ended up divided, and from that fracture would spring bitter scenes and long silences, especially as my parents climbed the social ladder, step by step, up the steep staircase of respectability.

Outside, the January wind swept over the hills of Bucaramanga, and roosters crowed atop the zinc rooftops. In my cradle mingled centuries of conquest and renunciation, and the murmur of that crossed blood—northern and highland alike—began to be the secret music of my destiny.

The happiness of those first days lasted until one afternoon in the Rionegro park, where I took my first steps to applause, and was set down on the grass beside Gabriela, my sister, nine months younger: the little girl whose eyes were already stealing everyone's affection.

Adelia held out a chocolate bar that gleamed in the sun like bait for moths. I took it, exploring that universe where things can be touched and held; Gabriela cried, and Adelia's slap landed like a dry thunderclap.

I felt fear for the first time, the anguish of punishment without cause, tears rolling down as my

sister looked on triumphantly. No one consoled me. Why her, and not me? The world operated under invisible codes everyone but me seemed able to read: precarious hierarchies of affection, like debts in a land registry where a man always pays the interest on his family's debts.

One had to see the world through Adelia's eyes, my mother, who, in her maternal fervor, distributed her love the way a landowner parcels out his estate, giving more to her daughter—Gabriela, whom my father and I called Chinita, for her almond eyes and her ruddy skin, the same shade as mine—than to me, her son. It wasn't out of malice, but a human error, deeply ingrained, that measured love according to a supposed feminine fragility. To her, Chinita, with her soft laugh, was her reflection, vulnerable to the hostile world of Bucaramanga, with its cobbled streets and lurking shadows. I, on the other hand, was meant to be strong, to carry the Saint-André name without complaint, as tradition dictated.

My father, David, understood it in his own way. With the patience of a surveyor marking boundaries under the sun, he sought to balance that uneven affection. At night, when silence filled our house, he would speak quietly with Adelia: "Marco needs your love too, Adelia. He's still just a boy." But the machismo inherited from a Bucaramanga where men were forged in the street and women sheltered at home overcame him. He always gave in, trapped by the norms of his own upbringing, while silently wrestling with his own

fear of failing to live up to what society expected of a man like him: power, money, influence.

That distress turned me withdrawn, a boy whose eyes measured shadows before smiles. We lived in an enormous house in Rionegro, inhabited by two elves: Vico and Mato, creatures of silk and velvet who smelled of wild daisies. They tamed me with games, and every afternoon I brought them crumbs from the kitchen, like offerings toward ancient debts.

We played hide-and-seek; they always won, until I noticed their four repeated hiding spots.

"Not even adults see their own habits," Vico said, surprised.

"What are repetitions?" I asked.

"Circles of betrayal," Mato replied. "Trust no one. You pity everyone in the house, even us, hunted to the death by humans."

"Are they evil?" I asked, remembering stories of guerrillas devouring Colombia's honesty.

"They call us thieves because we feed ourselves," Mato said, studying my smile. "We're like you. We never hear you protest when they scold you."

"Should I protest?"

"Then they would fear you. Be careful: the noble become prey to the cunning."

For Mato, the world depended on a delicate balance in which goodness and compassion could be mistaken for stupidity, advice I understood years later when, like them, I confronted those who would not allow me to feed—not my stomach, but my curiosity.

I embraced them, breathing in their fragrance as an antidote to family discipline. "Don't tell your parents we talk to you," Mato warned.

"Why not?"

"They'll say you dreamed it."

"I don't lie."

"Adults call the extraordinary a 'dream,' as though their own sages hadn't already shown them that their very being is itself only a dream."

That precept turned out to be a prophecy, for the next day I couldn't find them at home; for weeks I searched in closets, under beds, among the ferns in the courtyard, leaving crumbs as gifts in an empty bedroom. In the house, only my mother's footsteps and Gabriela's crying echoed.

One day, the air smelling of tomato stew and damp seeping through broken windows, Mato reappeared, a crooked moss cap on his head, laughing like dry leaves. We played for hours; at dusk, he taught me to read clouds. A scream tore out from the kitchen:

"Damn rat!" Adelia bellowed, brandishing the broom like an avenger's sword.

I ran, my pulse hammering. Mato, in the form of an ash-grey rat with jet-black eyes, zigzagged across the floor, claws scratching, dodging blows that stirred dust dancing in threadbare rays of sunlight. Adelia, face flushed, teeth clenched, hunted him like a household pest—from her point of view, eliminating a rodent that could infect us, through our food, with typhus or rabies.

"Stop, Mamá, it's not a rat!" I shouted, my voice cracking, throwing myself after them, tripping over a chair.

Mato slipped under the sideboard, his tail vanishing just as the broom cracked down, rattling the plates in the cupboard. I threw myself to the floor, my fingers brushing his trembling fur; his eyes, still magical, looked at me with a soul-splitting terror.

"I'll get you out," I whispered, Adelia looming behind me like a storm.

I drew him into my shirt, his little body pounding against my chest. I stood, pretending calm, but she advanced, broom raised like an executioner's blade.

"What are you hiding, Marco?" sharp as a blade.

"No-nothing, Mamá… a ball."

Mato stirred; a sharp squeal escaped his throat. My mother's eyes turned to embers. She blocked the exit, and my elf panicked, slipping as he leapt for the corner. I screamed as I watched him stumble, climb the curtain, tearing it as he fell, dazed. My mother cornered him against the wall; the broom whistled, and an almost-human shriek filled the room. For an instant, his rat-form dissolved: my elf, with his unruly hair, his moss cap, his calm eyes fixed on me, said goodbye that way, leaving behind his lifeless little body.

"He could have given you rabies!" was my mother's triumph, standing over his motionless body in a pool of blood on the floorboards.

My mother celebrated her victory over a pest that way, while I mourned the end of an inexplicable magic.

I collapsed, tears burning; I ran to my room, the door slamming against the walls. I cried, hugging my knees, the echo of that shriek still ringing in my ears. Years later I understood why we kill the harmless: fear and ignorance, but also that drive toward preventive survival, a fragile balance Adelia defended in her own way. Back then, all that mattered was the absence, the hole in my chest, the terror of a world that does not understand elves, and where I, too, still innocent, would be next on the list.

His teachings turned out to be prophetic. That Sunday, after Mass, I saw Gabriela arguing over colored rubber bands with two other girls; one challenged her to a fistfight and lunged at her. I stepped in, fist raised, but stopped: I might hurt her. She took advantage of the pause, spun me around, and punched me in the face; an accomplice threw a stone that struck my temple.

Everything dissolved into dream and darkness.

I woke up in my father's Jeep, blood in my mouth, a ringing in my ears. My mother, a handkerchief pressed to my face, was telling me:

"Always picking fights. You never learn."

Gabriela was crying, not for me, but for her lost rubber bands; and while she moaned over recovering her possession, I tasted incomprehension and indifference.

At the hospital, as a nurse cleaned my wound with iodine that stung like a reproach, I heard David

talking with another father in the waiting room, their voices filtering through the half-open door like echoes from a world I did not yet fully understand how to measure.

"He's very impulsive," David was saying. "He doesn't weigh the consequences."

"Boys are like that," the other man answered. "He'll learn."

But I didn't feel impulsive; I felt confused, a boy who had tried to protect his sister without hurting her attacker, and got hit with a rock for it. To me, it had been protection and respect; to them, impulsiveness.

Wasn't that the very lesson adults kept repeating: look after the smaller ones, the weak?

That afternoon I saw, in the deformed edges of the glass already beginning to cloud my innocence, that the rules of the adult world and the rules of what is just were two different things, each with its own perspective: theirs, an order meant to prevent chaos; mine, a resistance and a passivity that was, in truth, a protest.

Chapter 3. Our Move to El Diamante

Another day, two burly men—IGAC laborers, their hands calloused not only from measuring land but also, unknowingly, from measuring the nation's own pulse—loaded our belongings from the house in La Victoria and hauled them onto a truck that vanished down the hill.

Nearly a year had passed since my grandmother Elvia arrived in a taxi shaped like a boat: a 1962 Ford Fairlane 500. She had come to deliver Rosa to us—my father's septuagenarian great-aunt, whom everyone called Tita.

Tita was tall, with an aristocratic bearing, that old-fashioned air of women accustomed to giving orders without raising their voice. She wore a long white dress printed with purple laurels and hyacinths, and over her shoulders a thick black virgin-wool shawl. From her neck hung a rosary of *camándulas* made from tagua seeds, polished smooth from use.

Beside her rested her brown leather Globe-Trotter suitcase, luxurious in the fifties but now gently worn by the seventies, its silver clasps shaped like cherubs with outstretched wings.

Aunt Rosa had once been the wealthiest of my great-aunts. Unmarried by choice, she had inherited the greater share of my great-great-grandfather Ramón's fortune: three farms in Charalá. Her sweetheart had been an Air Force pilot; years later, that man died in the

plane crash that shook Bucaramanga, when a SICA aircraft went down at the airport, destroying several houses and hastening the closure of that terminal and the opening of another at Palonegro.

Rosa decided to remain single after the death of her brother—my great-great-grandfather Ramón—who, encouraged by an unscrupulous doctor, had fallen into morphine addiction at a time when such substances were still legal and physicians themselves prescribed them at exorbitant prices.

"Imported from China," they used to say, feigning an air of philanthropy, before promising it would soothe "all the ailments of the soul."

In the family genealogy—published years later at my father's urging, and edited by me—it was recorded that the cause of that fall was the sudden death of his wife, following some sinister rumor. We never learned what it had been about; it might have been an unsuitable friendship, a forbidden love, a crime of passion, or a simple slander. A mystery my great-great-grandfather barely alluded to when justifying his dependence after my great-great-grandmother's death.

Whatever the case, twelve children were left orphaned. Aunt Rosita, together with her sister, Aunt Aminta, took charge of raising them all with great diligence.

Aunt Aminta kept a macabre curiosity at home: a coffin she was, according to my father, saving "for when the hour came." And so it was: after her death, my father watched her be laid in it, a perfect fit, and carried to be buried in the Saint-André family

mausoleum, built on the land Aunt Aminta herself had donated to the Charalá parish.

The one most favored by their care was my grandfather Jonás, blond, the favorite son of both, born on December 24th. That preference led them to put three farms under his management, stirring resentment among his siblings, especially Uncle Sartorio, dark-skinned like my father, who despised his aunts for—as he put it—their Aryan preferences, a direct inheritance of nineteenth-century eugenics and the nationalisms the world would incubate in the thirties. It mattered little that Tita had later adopted my father, the darkest-skinned of his generation, as her own son.

After Aunt Aminta's death, Rosa continued caring for the children. The money, however, kept dwindling: my uncles traveled to Bogotá to study—Uncle Víctor, Law; Uncle David, Dentistry; Uncle Jaime, theology and philosophy with the Society of Jesus.

My grandfather Jonás, whose fortune never stopped growing, fell hopelessly in love with a dancer from Bucaramanga, whom he made his mistress. Without a second thought, he sold the farms and settled in Bucaramanga, where he invested in a textile company with more than a hundred sewing machines running day and night in a workshop on Carrera 36, near Parque Santander, and in an auto parts store on Carrera 15, along Bulevar Santander. His competitor was Nepomuceno Cartagena, a millionaire of the era who dominated the parts business. Jonás, however, innovated by importing parts directly from Japan, at

more accessible prices, though at the time Japanese products didn't yet enjoy the prestige they would gain in the eighties.

But tragedy struck. At thirty-six, Jonás died under murky circumstances. Some say he was murdered by a mistress; others, that he died reenacting, for the second time, the same feat that would inspire a passage in Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: shooting himself in the chest and surviving, as he had once done before, according to medical records Colombian universities still cite to their first-year students. In that second attempt—whether madness, daring, or machismo, traits that earned him the nickname "Crazy Jonás"—he lacked the precision required: the bullet cracked his heart.

His death set off a scandal. The Jesuits, worried about Uncle Jaime's reputation—already a member of the Society of Jesus—stepped in to prevent the death from being ruled a suicide. The insurance company, in exchange for my grandmother Elvia giving up the sizable life insurance payout, agreed to declare that Jonás had been murdered. Uncle Víctor, with a lawyer's cunning, insisted she sign the documents, a decision he would later regret: it condemned the family to ruin, dashing any dream of social ascent in the Bucaramanga of that era.

The one hit hardest was Aunt Rosa. From being one of the most sought-after unmarried women in Colombia, she became a beggar.

"It's Jonás's children who ought to support her!" Uncle Sartorio declared, with the tone of a prosecutor,

when my father suggested everyone chip in for her upkeep. "Because it was in you all that Aunt Rosa entrusted nearly her entire fortune!"

Aunt Rosa was first taken in by my grandmother Elvia, in a modest house in the Mutis neighborhood, bought with the sale of her last ten sewing machines. There lived Elvia, four of my aunts, Uncle Chico, and a granddaughter, the daughter of Aunt Melita, who, after divorcing an abusive husband, had to split her four children between her father-in-law and her mother. Complaints about the cost of supporting Rosa were not long in coming, and my father, though he resisted at first, began sending monthly stipends to help her.

His motivation went beyond family duty: when he was born, my grandmother Elvia—herself scarred by reproaches over her dark skin—lamented my father's golden complexion. It was Aunt Rosa who was moved by this, and who took him into her own bed, making him her heir.

Though Elvia later tried to reclaim him, it was already too late. My father thus lived a childhood few could match: king of the most beautiful corner house in Charalá—today the Saint-André family museum—with an immense brick oven, the only one still standing built by the ancient Guane people, capable of baking hundreds of loaves in a single day, with a flavor even the German-imported ovens of the Trillos family in Bucaramanga could never surpass, according to the people of Charalá. Owner of his own stable from the age of five, he rode across Aunt Rosa's vast farms, beyond the horizon, over more than a thousand

hectares of fertile land, with crystalline wells and ravines, in a time when peasants and landowners lived in harmony.

"I'm handing you three farms," Aunt Rosa told my grandfather Jonás, in my father's presence, "but on the condition that one be for little David, and the third for whatever grandson he gives you."

Verba volant, scripta manent, my father used to recall from his Latin lessons: words fly, but what is written remains. Once in possession of the farms, my grandfather disposed of them with no consideration for my father, and even less for a grandson he would never meet.

Over time, tensions with Rosa grew. Her aristocratic character, forged among haciendas and the company of bishops and cardinals—to whom, inspired by a passage from the Gospels, she once gave away all her jewelry, including the legendary Verdeña, an emerald the size of a thumb, carved to resemble a lush cliffside, set into a golden diadem lined with diamonds—clashed with life in a small house shared with six relatives. It was said she sometimes tripped the younger children, or scolded them harshly. My aunts, for their part, played small tricks on her, feeding the friction. It all came to a head when Rosa fell down the stairs. My father, upon hearing of it, had no choice but to take her in and bring her to our house. My mother, though she objected at first, accepted her wifely duty and reorganized our home so Aunt Rosa—Tita—could live with us.

For me, her arrival was cause for joy. I became the apple of her eye, heir to the affection she had once lavished on my grandfather Jonás, and on my father. Tita would comb my hair, talk with me, and, sometimes, hum in French, a language she told me she had learned in her youth. When I told my parents she spoke French, they didn't believe me. Confronted, she answered with a mischievous smile:

"There are plenty of things about me I don't have to tell everyone."

She did not, in fact, know French, so it might have been simple gibberish; but neither lying nor jokes were part of Aunt Rosa's character.

In that odyssey of filial gratitude, my father was not alone. First came Uncle Jaime, the Jesuit, already a national celebrity. His presence drew neighbors and journalists alike. He had fought for the rights of farmers and fishermen, advising them on how to acquire unclaimed land after the draining of the Guájaro lagoon (department of Magdalena, municipality of Manatí). For this he suffered torture and imprisonment. His release came after a protest that blocked the highway to Barranquilla and captured the media's attention, exposing the region's misery and pushing through, in 1970, the first land reform many still remember.

I was proud of Father Jaime. As soon as he walked in, I wanted to greet him; he didn't even look at me. He had come to see my great-aunt Rosita—our Tita. He knelt, kissed her hands tenderly, and wept in silence, repenting for having left her at the mercy of relatives who had treated her like Gregor Samsa in *The*

Metamorphosis. My mother took us out of the room. Hours passed. We heard little Jaimito sobbing, as she called him. Neither then nor ever afterward did we hear a single complaint from Tita against her relatives, or against the fate she had suffered. Her comfort was the Bible and the rosary, which she prayed twice a day. As he left her room, I tried to get my Jesuit uncle's attention, but he barely thanked my mother before leaving in his battered black 1960 Volkswagen, caked in mud from two days' travel from the coast.

It was a farewell visit. He was headed to Bogotá, to be treated for the bite of an extremely dangerous insect, the kissing bug (a triatomine bug), vector of Chagas disease. Only in 1997, when I interviewed people who had known him for my documentary, did I learn he was already traveling to die with a broken soul, betrayed by the very farmers and fishermen to whom he had given his life, and—after my grandmother Elvia gave up her life-insurance compensation—the wellbeing of my grandmother and Tita as well.

Two months after his death, Uncle David, sincerely grateful for the money Aunt Rosa had invested in his education—Dentistry, at the Javeriana—and for having sent him to the United States to have his face treated after a fire accident, now a millionaire himself, began sending generous sums to my parents and to Tita.

The news reached my grandmother Elvia's house, who immediately called my father to say how much they missed Tita, how much they wept over her absence, how much they needed "the joy of the household" back. My father, understanding the real

motive behind such laments, decided to send her back: not out of cruelty, but so his siblings could have financial help in those lean years.

Every Sunday we would visit my grandmother Elvia, a source of joy for me and my sister; my grandmother had a grapevine I would climb to reach its clusters and share with my sister, which drew my parents' fury and my grandmother's nervous laughter, as she ran a hand through her white hair, calling me a whirlwind.

One Sunday afternoon, my grandmother pointed out the first grey hairs on my father's head.

"Why are you going grey, Papito?" I dared to ask, with genuine curiosity.

"From all the trouble you give me," was his dry reply, which drew laughter from those present.

"In that case," I said, looking at my grandmother's snow-white hair, assuming, as I always did, that whatever he told me was true, "you must have given my grandmother Elvia many more problems."

Everyone burst out laughing, saying I never lost an argument.

Another afternoon, bored of the grown-ups' conversation, I went up to the second floor and caught Aunt Lucía admiring herself in the mirror, her bare thighs beneath her miniskirt, above tall patent-leather boots with crossed laces; I gave her a flirtatious smile, and she looked back at me provocatively.

"You're not wearing a bra!" I told her.

"Do you like snooping around in women's rooms?" she answered, lifting her golden blouse for a second, showing me her bare breasts.

I widened my eyes and my mouth, as startled as I was fascinated by that forbidden sight.

"You're going to be a Casanova," she told me, smiling. "One of these days I'm going to eat up those beautiful eyes of yours."

Aunt Lucía was what people back then called a liberated woman, a constant source of complaints from my grandmother Elvia, which she passed on to my father.

Every Sunday they'd shut themselves away to argue about morality, until Uncle Chico and Aunt Jazmín called us in to sit down for the week's favorite television program.

"*Mission: Impossible*!" we'd shout, and the announcement was echoed by dozens of neighbors out in the street.

Children and adults alike ran down the dusty sidewalks from the park to watch that action series, its theme song sending shivers through us in our seats.

"El Negro!" Uncle Chico would shout, delighted, since, despite his own light-brown hair, he always sided with minorities and the downtrodden.

"El Negro" was, back then, an affectionate nickname in Colombia; my father used it for me for years, until the wave of semantic correction in the nineties forced him to drop it, just as, by 1982, he would also forbid me from calling Gabriela "Chinita." In *Mission: Impossible*, "El Negro" was the African

American agent who understood electronics and video cameras better than anyone else on early-seventies television.

Uncle Chico's other heroes were Bruce Lee and Che Guevara, whose enormous posters decorated the walls of his room, the same one he shared with Aunt Rosa.

"Who's this?" I asked, pointing at Che.

"The defender of the humble!" he said. "If they hadn't killed him, he'd already have had Marujita and every fat rich person in Cabecera del Llano put up against a wall and shot."

I knew who the people of Cabecera were—several friends of my father's, including cousin Eva. His remark unsettled me, and I asked who Marujita was. He let out a laugh and said she was the city's "crazy woman," a man who, for a few pesos, offered sexual services to gentlemen. I didn't understand and asked him to explain; Uncle Chico, shrugging, changed the subject:

"And do you know who this is?"

"No…"

"Bruce Lee. A little Chinese man, a kung fu master, who could take down seven gringos at once, bare-handed."

"And not anymore?" I asked, noticing he spoke of him in the past tense.

"He died drinking a Coca-Cola with aspirin."

I opened my eyes wide, startled to think death could come from something so trivial.

Before we moved to El Diamante, my father had thought about bringing Tita with us—there was more room—but Elvia insisted once again that it would be better for her to stay with the rest of the family. Tita, too, told my father that she was now treated like a queen. So the move would be into a new, unknown world: just the four of us, alone.

Left behind were the memories of my last birthday, which my father had celebrated with shiny paper party hats and confetti, a cake covered in red jam, and a bottle of Sansón wine. It had been a small party: only my father, my mother, and my sister. We had no friends: at four years old, my mother watched over us jealously, keeping us away from the neighbors' children, convinced we deserved better company. Our friends were our cousins and the children of my father's coworkers; for them, the land registry office organized parties with clowns.

Nearly a hundred children attended one such party. The hired clowns—two tall young men, armed with wooden slats that snapped loudly when struck—seemed ready to entertain us. But what began as childish glee turned into a nightmare. No one knows for certain what set off the chaos: some say a boy kicked a clown; others, that my shouting, too close to his ear, burst his eardrum. What is certain is that one of them, seized by a sudden fury, began handing out blows left and right, striking us on the head. At first we laughed, thinking it was part of the game. Most of us were four, though there were some three-year-olds—like Chinita—and some five-year-olds—like my cousin Francisco, Aunt

Melita's son, who lived with his grandfather in Cabecera del Llano. Soon I saw children rubbing their heads, others falling dazed onto the coliseum's tiled court. The clown lunged at my sister and struck her a blow that echoed like a punch in my own chest. I ran to defend her, and he hit me too. Children fled in terror; some searched for the exit, but the door was locked. The second clown, who had until then only watched, let out a shrill laugh and joined the violence, chasing us with his giant white shoes, huge as dinosaur claws, stomping us like slaughterhouse animals. The nightmare lasted nearly an hour, until Denisito, my father's friend, opened the door and announced the "fun" was over. We ran out screaming and crying in search of our parents, while the clowns, unmoved, packed up their speakers and instruments, which they'd barely touched at the start of their macabre show.

My parents dismissed my complaints, though Chinita, in her innocence, kept repeating that she hated clowns, rubbing her head between tears. That night, her screams woke us. I was the first to reach her side. She hugged me, saying the clown had come back to hit her again. My parents, laughing, consoled her, assuring her it was only a nightmare and promising never again to let her near a clown. In the following days, Chinita kept insisting the clown was in the house, like a spirit tormenting her. Her nighttime screams convinced my parents to look for a new neighborhood to live in. We still wonder whether it was trauma from the blows, or something more sinister. What is certain is that, after our move, Gabriela never dreamed of clowns again.

It was in the house in La Victoria that we had our first television. I remember my astonishment on seeing it, and how, with my sister, we'd jump behind the set the moment our parents left, looking for where the little elves hid, the ones that put on those shows full of laughter or love for us.

The move happened in an enormous truck, an exodus that was both melancholic and thrilling: the nostalgia for what was lost and the pleasure of discovering the new. My mother and I were put in a taxi that followed the truck across rolling hills and buildings rising like Towers of Babel under construction, until we crossed the imposing Benjamín García Cadena Viaduct over the abyss: the canyon carved over millennia by the La Iglesia stream, shaping the contour of the Bucaramanga plateau. The view dissolved into winding paths that snaked down and up into a mountain range matching the plateau's height, a turnoff from the highway leading into our newly built neighborhood: El Diamante, second phase—El Diamante II—built, paradoxically, on an immense property that had belonged to my great-great-grandfather Gabriel, Elvia's father, and which had been handed down to his eldest son, Herminio, who died of a heart attack at forty. The land became the subject of a dispute among relatives, at a time when women were easy prey for swindlers; hordes of squatters and real-estate developers took advantage of it. Overnight, the Urbina Development Company took possession of that land, showing purchase deeds in Uncle Herminio's name. His

sisters—my grandmother among them—sued, but their efforts only exhausted their already dwindling finances.

From the highway we turned onto half-paved streets, alongside a dirt lot where the whitewashed walls of a small church barely rose above the ground—rough-hewn, like something out of a Mexican-American Western—its crooked tower topped by a makeshift cross of raw wood. We turned left down a block of wide, identical colonial-style houses and parked in front of a dead-end side street. We would live on the outskirts of Bucaramanga, in a house with an enormous inner courtyard that opened up like a plain, fenced in by walls as tall as those of the Cretan Minotaur's labyrinth.

Gabriela and I jumped for joy, thrilled by the smell of fresh cement and freshly cut wood: aromas that were a remedy against transience, that ever-present threat of moving yet again. We lay down and rolled across the grassy lot, full of crickets and worms, creatures that would whisper secrets to us from their damp homes.

The house smelled of endless possibilities: every room a territory to conquer; every corner, a world to discover. Best of all was the view from what would become my bedroom, on the second floor: a barred iron window over the raw-tile roof sloping down to the front courtyard, facing the avenue and the side street, and, beyond that, the majestic Viaduct—the pride of our engineers—which had solved the old highway's access problem, a narrow ribbon of curves that once dropped into the ravine before climbing back up toward the Terrazas neighborhood.

In Rionegro, our house had been dark, with narrow hallways and rooms where the sun barely crept in: a labyrinth of shadows that foreshadowed the ills of family oppression. In La Victoria our house had been even smaller, without wide windows or dirt patios. This new house in Bucaramanga was bright and airy, and in its courtyard we could run in circles without hitting a single wall: a space of freedom after months of confinement. For the first time since the incident in the park with the chocolate bar, I felt something like happiness: not euphoria, but stillness; a balance in which novelty made up for the upheaval of the move.

That week brought one of the fiercest storms I remember: a downpour that turned the streets into primordial mudflats. We took the clay in our fingers and shaped figures of people and animals: a childish, demiurgic act. My sister made dogs and cats—everyday domesticity; I tried to mold warriors and dragons that always ended up collapsing: unstable matter foreshadowing human fragility.

The fun ended when several trucks dumped tons of gravel and two steamrollers paved the streets, spreading a penetrating smell of tar and asphalt. It was the price of progress: the asphalt, an infinite grey tombstone burying our spontaneous, moldable mud. The smell seeped into clothes, hair, and food; Adelia kept the windows shut, but it crept in through every crack. We walked around for days with handkerchiefs over our noses, while the workers shouted instructions in an Andean dialect and the machines roared like

mechanical beasts, devouring the mud of our childhood.

Our house—the house of my childhood, the center of my universe until my move to Bogotá at seventeen; a microcosm of memories layered like sediment—stood on Avenida 88, número 22-46, facing a cul-de-sac that opened like a private park before my solitary throne, fronted by a blanket of red tiles like the scales of a sleeping dragon. There, lounging on the giant boulders the builders had left on the sidewalks like remnants of some prehistoric landscape, I met two neighbors who would become the first threads in the tapestry of my human companionship.

"My name's Sergio," said a boy with big teeth and thick black hair, pointing to his curly-blond-haired friend.

"That's Abhad, and that one over there is my brother Hortensio."

I looked at a boy two years older than us.

"I'm Marco," I answered. "What do we play?"

"Tag," Abhad suggested.

"And then marbles," I said, nodding.

Our first adventures were exploring the neighborhood, often crossing the boundaries our parents set for us. "What's beyond the mountains?" one of us asked, and the question launched us, in short pants and cotton shirts, down the slopes of the canyon that fell away barely a block from my window, behind the row of houses marking the edge of the neighborhood. We first walked along the abyss's rim, watching the

Viaduct for hours: the cars gliding across it, people walking beside its barely one-meter-high railing.

It was already famous, back then, for its suicide rate, and what was our shock when, one December afternoon, we saw a figure, dressed as a woman, throw itself from the railing.

"She killed herself!" Hortensio shouted, running forward, as though he might stop her before she fell.

We watched the crowd from the San Martín neighborhood pour out of their houses to gather around the body with morbid curiosity. That neighborhood was a scattering of zinc-roofed houses around a soccer field, opening up beyond the lush undergrowth of the La Iglesia stream, under the bridge.

There was a strange delicacy to those suicides: over the thirteen years I watched unfortunate souls throw themselves from the Viaduct, none ever jumped toward the railing overlooking the field where children and adults played; it was always toward our side, over the immense hillside that, because of the dispute already mentioned, remained wild and uninhabitable. To us it was a private park, a universe to explore.

There we went down one day to have a barbecue, bringing charcoal from my house, some pieces of meat, and a pot of Abhad's, at Sergio's suggestion. We found a cave amid dry brush and lit the wood. We were already grilling the meat when the fire spread to the roof of branches, catching as though soaked in gasoline. We screamed and fled like lost souls, leaping through bushes and nettle patches that clung to our legs, leaving sores that lasted a week. Back at the

edge of the neighborhood, we watched the blaze consume the trees. We shut ourselves indoors, hearts racing. That night I kept peeking out the window, again and again, fearing the fire would spread into our own lots, like something out of an episode of *Little House on the Prairie*. The next morning, ratted out by his sister Marisa, Abhad had to confess what had happened; he got a beating, and I heard his screams from my window. Luckily the fire hadn't consumed the whole hillside; that afternoon we went back and found the charred pot among the ashes.

Toward the right lay the main avenue, and halfway down, in front of a shop that smelled of fresh flour and forbidden sweets, I met Gino Camacho: tall, with deep black hair and eyes, a confident smile, a bridge between strangers. Two houses down lived César, freckled and red-haired, my faithful squire.

"Let's play cops and robbers!" I proposed.

Right away, César cut me a branch shaped like a revolver: a wooden weapon that was as much a game as an omen of the shadows of adulthood.

Gino had a sister, Berta, with whom I instantly hit it off: lively eyes, the same fascination with clouds. However, at the end of a dispute over a ball—that sphere that rolls like fate itself—she had to choose between her brother and me; she chose her brother. It hurt me, though I understood her loyalty: sibling honor from her side, the exclusion of friendship from mine. With Gino and Berta we played hide-and-seek, and, in our roaming, we would reach the block called Los Lindos, the name we gave to two rows of houses where,

unlike ours, classes didn't mix: our colonial houses lived side by side, without friction, alongside prefabricated-wall homes, arranged along the edges of side streets running perpendicular to our own block. Up there, it was only colonial house facing colonial house; the white of their walls, repainted every six months, gave them a calm splendor, unlike the din of our own street, stirred up by children's shouts spilling into those enormous courtyards, the side streets.

Los Lindos had better equipment; they played on an improvised field laid out over the street at the edge of the neighborhood, a dusty, pebbled expanse where they protected the soles of their feet with cleats; in our neighborhood we fell and rolled over the cement of the side street or the asphalt of the avenue. The cleats made Los Lindos class-conscious: they considered themselves better-bred. Over time they formed a gang that clashed with ours. At thirteen, when we started taking an interest in girls, I courted Adriana, a chestnut-haired maiden who lived three houses from the corner; she received me several times at her spacious house, until one day she introduced me to her "boyfriend," Eduardo, one of Los Lindos. I later learned that, having noticed my presence on their turf, his friends had forced him to declare his love for his neighbor, purely to mark their territory and drive me out.

Our block was a microcosm with its own laws and hierarchies; each group had its own truth. Sergio, Hortensio, and Abhad didn't mix with Gino and César; I moved my allegiance between each group, just as they combined their own affections with neighbors from

other side streets: a small-scale social tapestry of complexity. Those from the third side street, with René and Óscar, were dreamers who collected stamps from faraway countries. René, tall, cheerful, gangly, his mouth always open like an invitation to talk; Óscar built cardboard cities that he then destroyed in epic battles with toy soldiers: creation that includes destruction, in order to be reborn.

Through Sergio and Hortensio I met Colato, who lived on the corner of the second side street: skin nearly black, the whites of his eyes gleaming, an obsessive sense of honesty—he never cheated, and he'd report anyone who did. His brother William was red-haired and curly-haired, a natural troublemaker but with a firm code of friendship. And there was Diego, their neighbor, baby-faced but defiant, easily offended by anything, with whom I nearly had to fight after he challenged me to a duel.

Sometimes I'd disappear from one circle of friends for a week or two, off playing with kids from another block; on my return, my friends would reproach me for my absence, even as they welcomed me back with the swift forgiveness only childhood allows. I quickly learned to move between groups: toward the edge of our block with René and Óscar, where conversations drifted into board games; in the middle, with Gino, César, and Berta, with whom I played hide-and-seek and tag; and in front of my own house, with Sergio, Hortensio, and Abhad, who organized soccer matches.

Colato, William, and Diego floated between several groups too, like me. That diplomacy came naturally: I understood that building bridges gave me freedom. My retreats—occasional at first, then longer, as my parents' punishments piled up—gradually pulled me away, until one night in 1984 when, egged on by new residents of the neighborhood who envied my family's fortune, I had to withstand an attempted lynching, a subject I later wrote about in "Mazotes," one of the stories in my book *Santandereanos*.

I still wonder today why adults idealize children so much, when there is no group more prone to quarreling. With the caveat that, however violent, children reconcile just as quickly: a punch in the morning is forgotten by afternoon if the offender offers a marble, or proposes an interesting game. Childhood carries the gift of impermanence, a remedy against the resentment that causes such damage in adults. Animals, too, know how to forget offenses. Isn't that forgetting—mother of forgiveness—the lost paradise? Adults ferment their grudges for years; children, for hours.

1973 rolled on, and crime had no place on our horizon—not adult crime, that organized evil of La Violencia, at least—so we played without supervision: with autonomy, but not anarchy. Disputes and fights were frequent and would mark distances of a week or two, rarely three. We learned to weave temporary alliances, to trade favors like bargains struck in a marketplace, to settle differences through systems of childish justice no adult would ever have decoded. Our

instinctive fairness, born of necessity, proved more effective than many a written code.

The true feast of my childhood in El Diamante happened at lunchtime—rice, meat, and those stews my mother turned into banquets: beans that tasted of tradition, *yota* with egg and toasted bread, squash with spinach, lentils in tomato sauce, and those stuffed cucumbers that oozed savory juices. Cooking herself, or expertly directing her helper, my mother lent every dish a grace that surpassed even the meals we saw on television. No restaurant could ever compete with us.

Then, while my parents took their siesta, the street filled with voices like a choir of communion. Shouts of "Tag!" rang between the houses; the click of marbles marked the afternoon's rhythm. Adults watched us from their windows, but rarely intervened, content with the illusion of control. We were an autonomous tribe, governed by its own laws.

I also met Igor, two houses down: the boy with the toys, prince of his tower of shelves crammed with action figures, metal cars, transforming robots, remote-control planes. Meeting him, I got excited, picturing shared treasures.

"They're not for playing with, only for looking at," his mother, Dolores, told me the first time I crossed his threshold.

The toys stayed in their boxes, lined up like items in a vanity shop. Igor could look at them and name them, but touching them was forbidden: a taboo that turned play into mere contemplation. I understood there was no fun to be had visiting a place where the

toys were as unreachable as those on television. I stopped visiting him, though, passing by, I'd sometimes see him sitting there, staring at his motionless treasures with an expression I couldn't name back then, and which I now recognize as melancholy.

Lacking toys of my own, I made friends with the floor tiles, learning to recognize their shapes by mottled stains I took for clouds in a marble sky. It was my map of imagination, populated with daydreams that chased away loneliness. My games were with them: jumping from one tile to another without touching the stains—if I failed, I had to go back to the start: purification through repetition. "Turquoise" was the most feared tile: barely two tiny bare patches, surrounded by tiles with none at all; a labyrinth that trained my sense of space to withstand struggle and dodge failure.

Other times, after a slap from Adelia, or a taunt from Gabriela, I would lie down on the tile floor to comfort myself with its coolness. I felt that coldness as something welcoming, almost affectionate; years later I understood I had sensed a truth: those tiles were the delicate fingernails of a loving, giant Being, extensions of our intimate mother: Gaia, Pachamama, the Virgin Mary…

My mother caught me in that position one afternoon, her shadow falling over me.

"What are you doing lying on the floor like a dog?"

I got up at once. Explaining the tiles would have been useless, since adults don't accept the refuges a

child imagines for himself—a child who talks to floor tiles, thanking them for their coolness.

"I'm going out to play," I said.

"Finally," she sighed. "Like a normal child…"

I remember one afternoon when we argued over whether girls could play soccer with us: an embryonic debate on equality and segregation.

"No," Diego insisted. "It's a boys' game."

Berta challenged him:

"If I score a goal against you, girls can play whenever they want."

Diego accepted, confident. Berta scored the goal after several attempts. Diego kept his word, but for two weeks refused to take part in any game she was in. His silence was condescending and instructive, since Berta was later treated brutally, we learned, during a soccer match against Los Lindos. Diego, we understood then, had let her score to spare her feelings.

Hortensio corrected my ideas with an air of superiority; his premature maturity would become a source of tension with Sergio, whom he mocked for his protruding teeth and occasionally rapped on the head for his innocent questions; his distance from our group ended up being his greatest virtue.

The El Diamante of the seventies would have been a paradise—an Andean Eden where innocence unfolded in games that mimicked life—had our own mother Eve not bitten the apple of discernment.

Every afternoon, ragged children appeared on the corner with plastic bags, asking for leftovers from lunch: the slum then displayed its own generosity,

purchased at the cost of that inequality. Three or four of them came, as the sun began to set; the neighbors brought out the scraps from their plates and pots and poured them into bags already half-full of rice, bone, and lentils, forming a paste-like mass.

"They're beggars from San Martín," Sergio explained to me. "My dad says they're children of people who just came from the countryside."

We never exchanged a word: dignity and misery. A parallel world intersecting ours through silent transactions. They never played with us, never studied, never entered our homes. Visible and invisible boundaries. They didn't press or complain; they simply held out their bags and waited. Timeless, resigned faces, in which patience was their answer: their resilience, our indifference.

I watched them from the window. What separated us? Why leftovers for them, while we played? Fate, error, an injustice of the street corner? Adelia caught me.

"Don't stare at them so much," she said. "The street brings sickness. Be careful."

Was it lack of ambition… or wisdom, acceptance of greater forces? Against her warning, I approached a boy my age: big dark eyes, thin face.

"What's your name?"

"Esteban."

"Want to play?"

He glanced at his companions; their expressions were a language with no translation.

"I can't. We have to get back before it gets dark."

"Why?"

"Just because."

That answer—frustrating—stuck with me: the "just because" of adults as the world's own rule; their practical truth, my incomprehension. My mother called me over and scolded me.

"Don't ever talk to those people again," she said. "Do you know what diseases they might carry?"

"He seemed clean," I replied.

"Those are people who, when you grow up, won't be able to help you," she declared, and shut the window.

That calm, cordial society—good manners as a façade over a fractured house—crumbled one Saturday in 1973, the turning point of our innocence. There had been signs: unfamiliar cars, moving slowly; men lingering on corners, mentally taking notes. Absorbed in our games, we ignored them.

At midday, a group of children and young people from Bogotá—their accent "foreign" to us—arrived in a wave of confidence and numbers. They stole the ball Gino had been playing with; they grabbed it and ran, laughing at our protests. Gino chased after them; they shoved him to the pavement. Frozen, we understood the rules had changed: they were Robin Hoods taking what wasn't theirs for the sake of survival, the invasion of Rome by Vandals and Goths.

Gabriela had her tricycle taken from her right in front of the house; she cried, David ran after them in vain. Other neighbors had televisions, washing machines, beds, motorcycles looted from them. Their

efficiency was the work of coordinated groups and roving lookouts. That night, the neighborhood fought and lost its battle. Families gathered at Don Lisandro's house, owner of the block's only telephone. The adults, voices raised, listed off their losses, and every variation of the verb "give back" became the catharsis of the victims of the slum's first great looting.

"It's communism," Don Lisandro explained before our astonished eyes. "Or the resentment spreading from Bogotá into the provinces. The inspector says they're going around convincing people that whoever has something ought to give it to whoever doesn't."

"I understand about the toys," Adelia cut in, "but a motorcycle?"

"The inspector searched the whole neighborhood and it never turned up," Lisandro said. "The urban guerrilla's surely stripping it down to sell as parts in Bogotá."

"From now on we'll live like they do in the capital," David nodded, "doors always locked, with a bolt too."

"Locked and bolted?" Don Ernesto asked, incredulous.

"The children won't be able to play in the street unsupervised anymore," Herminia, Abhad's mother, nodded.

The neighborhood transformed overnight, saying goodbye to those open doors and shutting them for good, for our own safety. We heard parents calling their children in before nightfall; watch shifts were set

up, and Don Lisandro bought a bell to amplify any sign of trouble. There was also a radical change in the once-calm faces of that neighborhood: neighbors now narrowed their eyes with malicious suspicion, and a climate of general alert filtered down even to the outhouses. From then on, every stranger would be treated as a potential thief. Any unfamiliar child who showed up would be branded a member of the Bogotá horde.

That was how that paradise was profaned.

I sat in a corner of the living room, watching the assembly of adults. Politics, guerrillas, communism: threatening words, each carrying its own truth—from fear of change to the defense of order. The tone was apocalyptic: it wasn't objects that had been stolen from us, but our sense of security.

"They'll come back," Don Lisandro said. "They always come back. Now they know there's something here."

"Then we have to be prepared," answered Don Fidel, Gino's father, a short, sturdy man who rarely spoke, but whom everyone listened to. "Next time they won't get away so easily."

There were murmurs of approval. The men planned watch shifts, the buying of bats and chains. The women took inventory of their belongings and hid them. We children looked at one another, dimly understanding some nameless ending.

Days later, the neighbors caught a thief red-handed. Don Lisandro had left his Renault 4 with the keys in the ignition; the thief took the bait. Blows rained

down; he was dragged to the corner; the police saved him—excess evil, absence of law. I watched the toothless man pass beneath my window. The motorcycle's owner shouted, demanding to know where it was; the thief said nothing. A karate practitioner kicked him in the face: understandable anger, taken too far.

That night, after dinner, while Gabriela slept and the neighborhood recovered its own uneasy silence, I sat in the living room with my father and mother. They talked about the incident with that mix of indignation and nostalgia adults use to deal with the present: processing the exceptional as the new normal.

"This never used to happen," my mother said, pouring coffee. "When I was a girl, out in the countryside of Socorro, no one stole. The farmhands and laborers honored their patrones. There was order."

"A natural order," David nodded, lighting a cigarette. "My father had farms. Thirty families lived there. No one went hungry. There was always food and work. No one complained."

"So why do they steal now?" I asked.

David looked at me with the expression he reserved for my more intelligent questions.

"From ideas that come from outside," he said. "From Russia, from Cuba. They put it in people's heads that the landowner is an exploiter, that poverty is unjust, that they're entitled to what others have built."

"But if someone doesn't have food," I insisted, "wouldn't it be fair to share at least one clean plate, instead of scraps?"

Adelia set down her cup with more force than necessary.

"We've always given a tithe to the church. The priests and the nuns have special programs to give food and education to the poor, like Fe y Alegría. But there's a difference between Christian charity and theft. The farmhands of before knew their place. They lived at peace because they accepted the order God had established."

"And what if that order isn't just?" I asked, thinking of the children from San Martín.

David leaned forward, serious under the yellow lamplight.

"Justice depends on the ruler you measure it with, Marco. In my childhood, whoever was born poor knew he would die poor. That was the order. And people were happy, because they didn't want what wasn't theirs to want. Do you understand? Unhappiness doesn't come from hardship, but from envy."

"It's like a dog," Adelia said, searching for an analogy. "You have a dog in your house, well fed, sheltered. It's happy. But one day it sees the stray dogs and thinks: 'they're free, they can go wherever they want.' It runs away. It discovers freedom is hunger, cold, and fights. It wants to come back, but the door's already shut."

"And it suffers," David continued. "Those communists open the door for the poor, tell them they can be free, that they can have what the rich have. They don't tell them freedom has a price. And by the time

they find out they can't pay it, it's too late: they can never go back to what they were."

"And is that bad?" I asked. "Wanting to be free, even at the cost of your own wellbeing?"

"Maybe suffering is what they need," David said, putting out his cigarette. "It's tragic. True freedom doesn't exist. There will always be masters and servants, rich and poor—Jesus himself said so. What we had before was peace, because everyone accepted their fate. What we have now is resentment dressed up as justice."

I stayed silent: the argument was as clear as an IGAC map, but something in me rejected it, though I couldn't yet find the words. I needed to weigh those views against those of the outcasts.

"Go to sleep," Adelia ordered. "And pray for those poor wretches who've had their brains washed."

I climbed the stairs, but their voices stayed with me. I thought of the toothless thief, his swollen face, his screams. Had he been a happy dog until someone opened his cage? Or a hungry one who'd never found his door open at all? Why was it that what some worked so hard for, with such care, was seized by others with such violence, even at the risk of their own lives?

Years later, one winter outside Besançon, sitting by the fireplace at my French in-laws' house, I read some of Frantz Fanon's work. A Martinican psychiatrist who fought in Algeria's liberation, dead in 1961 at thirty-six, Fanon dismantled, with surgical precision, colonial mythologies: the oppressor's evil, disguised as civilizing good; from the point of view of the oppressed, resistance against domination. In *Les Damnés de la Terre*,

prefaced by Sartre, I read, that snowy night, his central claim: that colonialism is not some rational, thinking machine, but violence in its rawest, natural state—and that it yields to nothing but a still greater violence.

I traced the fallacy of that childhood argument back to its root: for my father and mother, stability was the most precious thing of all, no matter that it came at the cost of an order imposed from above. The "peace" they remembered had not been peace at all, but silence: the silence of those with no voice to name their own oppression. And the "natural order" was not natural, but imposed by the slow, invisible violence of custom, resignation, and the absence of any alternative. Violence had not arrived with "foreign ideas": it had already been there, buried beneath paternalism and charity. I understood the good my parents saw in their own tradition; from the other side, it was the evil of perpetuated inequality. Adding another angle, Paulo Freire would go on to propose a liberating, dialogical education, centered on critical awareness rather than the mere "banking" transmission of knowledge.

The counterargument I found in the works of Emanuel Swedenborg. For the Swedish mystic, poverty—like illness—is, above all, a temptation. Saint Francis of Assisi understood that property is itself a form of slavery: the moment you own something, you must protect it. When a landowner once asked my uncle Jaime whether he truly owned anything at all, he pointed to the landscape before them.

"All this is mine," he said. "Not the owner's, on some notarized paper, who isn't even here today, but

mine, right now: this air, this view, this sun. All of it was given to me by the Creator. Why do you live enslaved to a piece of paper that is nothing but appearance?"

Art, on the other hand, has taught me that what enriches us is not possessions, but the emotions a song, a poem, or a film gives us; the imperishable conquests of knowledge, the experiences that, as Montaigne prescribes, we come to inhabit through our own passage. Anne Catherine Emmerich would add that it is our good works, whatever we have forgiven, that grant us the immense gardens and crystal mansions of eternity, one of which I glimpsed in a dream in 2004 that foretold the death of my Nonita Kuki, and her beautiful domains in eternity.

But that night in 1973 I was still a confused boy, trying to understand why the adult world celebrated blood on the pavement while mourning the loss of a peaceful past that—I already suspected—had never truly embraced every citizen of Bucaramanga, that mythical bastion built atop the ruins of colonial denial.

I watched the whole scene from my second-floor window, my private observatory of the human drama. The thief was bleeding from his nose and mouth; his eyes, swollen, nearly shut. He tried to shield his face, but every time he did, someone kicked his ribs until he lowered his arms again. It was a cycle of rage varnished as popular justice: the mask of justice laid over the vile face of excess.

The neighbors formed a circle around him, shouting, cursing, demanding a confession: collective self-defense run amok. I felt no compassion; to feel it, I

would have had to accept that my neighbors were monsters. What I felt was more complicated: fear and horror. Fear, because I saw that adults could turn into a pack of wolves; horror, because it was the first time I had seen justice—or what they called justice—in action: an executioner imitating the acts of the criminal in order to assert his own supremacy.

When the police arrived and took him away, the neighbors dispersed, talking excitedly, as though they had acted heroically. But the blood—that part of a man so intimately my fellow creature—remained on the pavement, darkening beneath the afternoon sun. I stared at it in horror until Adelia drew the curtains and ordered me to sit down at the table for dinner.

That night, lying in bed, I heard my father and mother talking in the kitchen.

"At last they did something," David was saying.

"But they nearly killed him," Adelia answered.

"Sometimes it's necessary. So they learn to respect others."

I stared at the ceiling in the dark, thinking about the toothless man, about the children of San Martín with their bags of greasy leftovers, about Mato and his shriek when the broom came down. I thought about the invisible rules: who deserves praise, and who deserves a kick to the face; who decides, and why. Gabriela slept in the next room—her breathing soft, steady, innocent. She was three, too young yet to understand that our community's civilized façade had come crashing down.

I wondered whether the elves had known, whether that was why they'd warned me not to trust anyone:

"Be careful," Vico had said.

"You're too noble," Mato had warned.

But I did not want to stop being noble. I wanted to learn the rules by winning people over: to navigate that shifting world, which rewarded kindness one day and punished it the next, with eyes that inspired sympathy; to tame the violence of justice and, through the wisdom Jesus revealed in His parables, redirect the human need that gave rise to theft and afflicted us all.

I missed Mato, the elf my mother had sent to a better life with her broom weeks earlier. I could still see him running in the guise of a rat, terror in his eyes yet, somehow, a trace of amusement as well, as I tried to save him beneath my shirt. His almost human shriek was also a cry of liberation. For an instant I saw him stripped of his disguise—the unruly-haired elf himself—before magic wrapped around him once more, leaving me only his final gesture: that unforgettable, serene farewell smile.

"They call us thieves, and by doing so they summon thieves," he told me clearly in my mind.

I smiled, content.

"You already know we are spirits, and we never die," he reassured me.

"That's right," Mato said.

Wasn't that thief like Mato as well? A being driven to steal in order to feed himself, pursued by a world that regarded him as a pest? And weren't my

neighbors merely reflections of my mother, brandishing brooms of contempt against anyone who threatened their store of grain?

Those comparisons gave me certainties that quieted my restless search for understanding.

I fell asleep asking questions that Mato answered, and I would go on asking them until the day he urged me to draw closer to my Master, advice that would eventually lead me toward nirvana across continents and languages, through the works of Aristotle, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Bernard Shaw, Shakespeare, Beckett, Böhme, Borges, Swedenborg, and many others, until my epiphany in 2011.

From the murmur of the waves of the Gulf of Morrosquillo, radiant, came the answers to the questions asked that night of my childhood, in a bedroom on the outskirts of Bucaramanga. Paradise was lost, and paradise was regained; the serpents of the deadly sins that had tormented me through my youth—as they tormented Dalí's Saint Anthony—now lay crushed in the grass, just as I had seen barely a week earlier on my daily walk with my Boston Terrier elves, Cleopatra and Jean-Luc.

For—I thought, with growing joy, as I revised this chapter—to live is to suffer uncertainty, until we learn to tame the evil and the ignorance that deny that truth and immortality hold within them the beauty and the lost purity we still seek.

Chapter 4. The Shadows of the Boundary

One afternoon in 1974, Bucaramanga was a mosaic of heat and dust, the sun falling like melted glass over the streets of El Diamante. At five years old I wore well-starched cotton shirts and khaki drill shorts my mother ironed with great care at dawn, while Radio Todelar played the ballads of Palito Ortega and Los Ángeles Negros.

My skin gleamed like bronze in the sun; my wide, wonder-filled brown eyes turned honey-colored when I was happy and darkened to black with fear. My hair was straight, black, and thick, parted on the left, combed neatly to the right. When I laughed my broad smile revealed my large teeth, and one of my neighbors said I looked as though I'd stepped out of a Mexican western, in particular one of the boys who came to Charles Bronson's aid in the final duel of *The Magnificent Seven*.

I ran after a plastic ball through the alley behind Don Ernesto's shop, where it opened onto the hillside, where the air smelled of ripe mango and fresh cow dung, from the six cows belonging to Don Teodoro, a small farmer who owned the mountainside. Being far from my relatives back on the plateau still weighed on my chest, a nostalgia that children's games barely eased, like a cool breeze that fails to extinguish glowing embers.

My knees, scraped by the asphalt, bled a little, but I didn't care: the dried blood on my skin was the consequence of my adventures, proof that I was alive in this new world, where the black cement streets smelled of fresh tar and the stray dogs dozed beneath the broad shade of the almond trees. At home, Adelia, my mother, prepared lunch with Matilde, our young housekeeper; the smell of tomato stew floated like a balm, mixing with the birdsong from the rooftop. Gabriela, my four-year-old sister, drew with a red crayon in a notebook, humming a song learned at preschool, her voice a thread of light in the dim living room. The house, with its white walls and cool tiles, was a refuge where the world seemed orderly, but outside, in the alley, the rules were opaque, like the crooked lines I traced in the dust with a stick, imitating my father David's maps. He worked at the Agustín Codazzi Geographic Institute, measuring land with his theodolite, drawing lines that, he said, prevented fights. And I, with my child's mind, was beginning to suspect that some lines were drawn by mistake, or by whim, unleashing trouble, as though the world were made of invisible, inviolable borders everyone wanted to cross, leaving scratches behind: seeds of future atrocious crimes.

The Diamante neighborhood, with its two-story houses and English-lawn courtyards, was a labyrinth of alleys where we children were kings and bandits at the same time. Don Ernesto's shop, with its glass and stainless-steel counter and its radio always tuned to vallenato stations, was the center of our escapades. There we bought colorful lollipops and listened to the

elders' stories, who talked about fights in the market, or about someone named Matías, now a taxi driver, who had lost his government job "because of some snitch he'd sworn to crush."

I couldn't follow the thread of those stories, but the words stuck in my head, like pebbles in a river, colliding with one another until they formed a constant murmur. Wasn't Matías the name of the driver my father had reported?

It was a bright January morning when Mamá took me to kindergarten at the *Escuela Anexa a la Normal* de Señoritas de Bucaramanga, called the Anexa by some, and La Normal by others. The building, with its high walls of raw concrete and lime-green wooden windows, looked like an imposing dungeon, a fortress no innocent child would wish to enter. My mother handed me over to a stranger named Remedios, a tall, slender woman with thin lips and haughty eyebrows, a triangular jaw and a sharp nose; she wore angular tortoiseshell glasses that reflected the sun like mirrors, and her face reminded me of those elegant ladies in mink coats with black cigarette holders from the Sunday comic strips. She wore a white blouse and a sober sky-blue suit in the fashion of the early decade, printed with gladiolas, cinched tight around her thin frame, sleeves reaching down to her wrists.

Mamá said goodbye sobbing, her hands trembling as she let go of me, and the moment she left, Remedios shot me a stern look with eyes like an enormous fly's.

"Don't move from your spot," she snapped. "I'll be right back."

For the first time in my life I felt loneliness, standing still in a cement courtyard where boys and girls ran past me, their laughter and shouts a whirlwind that shut me out. Tears rolled down my cheeks, but I didn't dare burst into full sobs, since Papá had told me only girls were allowed to cry. Confirming his wisdom, a few steps away, I heard the whimper of one girl, then two, then three, and refuting it, I noticed several boys joining that chorus of sorrow, one my chest wanted to keep time with like a tin drum.

That whirlwind faded when a woman of about thirty, with wide, black, lacquered hair like a hat, came over. She wore enormous hoop earrings dangling from her ears, in the style of seventies blaxploitation fashion; her smile was soft, like a ray of light, and, taking my hand and that of two other classmates, she led us to a bright room, a thick red carpet giving way beneath my shoes; a classroom filled with toys and wooden blocks that smelled of fresh varnish, its windows so high they only let through a sliver of blue sky, clouds shaped like a stampede of animals.

And so, after crying over my mother's absence for what felt like an eternity, I began to bond with my classmates. There was a girl with a shy, sweet smile, taller than the rest, named Eugenia, with blue eyes that reminded me of Laura Ingalls, the girl from a TV show I'd seen on a color cover of a gossip magazine at Don Ernesto's shop. I felt drawn to her, seized by a childish admiration, as though her eyes held some secret only I

was meant to unravel. At recess, I ran to the school garden, where daisies grew among unruly weeds, plucked one with petals white as clouds, and offered it to her. She barely glanced at it, her smile fading, and turned her gaze toward Ovidio, a freckled, red-haired boy playing with a ball.

At the second recess, I challenged Ovidio to a fight, not out of hatred, but from some impulse to prove myself. I beat him, flailing my arms ceaselessly, a technique I'd seen an older boy use, like a human pinwheel. But Eugenia, instead of noticing me, consoled Ovidio with a hug, leaving my heart squeezed tight, a rejection I couldn't dampen, which felt like a broken line inside myself. I decided then to give her gifts. I started with a white lollipop striped in red and blue lines.

The school playground was, I already sensed, another world in miniature, with its own rewards and punishments. We children formed sides, like small armies, and recesses were battles of laughter and shoving. Eugenia, with her perfect braids and almond eyes, was queen of that world, and I, a clumsy knight seeking her attention.

One afternoon, after class, I saw Ovidio receive a shiny object from her hands, and his laughter hurt me more than the rejection of the flower had. It was one of the lollipops I had given her!

I decided I would never offer her anything again, but her image stayed in my head, like a drawing I couldn't erase.

The next morning, Doña Gloria picked me up in her blue-and-white 1959 Dodge van. She was in charge of opening and closing the door, and her husband, an obese, elderly man, drove to the beat of the ranchera songs he tuned in on the radio. The van gave off that smell of plastic so novel and pleasant in the seventies; a dozen children were packed onto the seats, laughing and pushing each other.

On the way home, Doña Gloria took roll call.

"Ulises Saint-André," she called.

No one answered. She insisted, frowning, and, before our stunned faces, got out, went into the school, asked around, came back, and said Ulises had gone in that morning.

"Ulises Saint-André," she repeated, her voice sharper.

Nearly half an hour passed, during which she and her husband went in and out of the school several times.

I took pity on her confusion and shouted "Ulises!" from the window, as though I could conjure him. Someone proposed counting the passengers: we were twelve.

"Then there's someone here who shouldn't be," Doña Gloria concluded, her cow-like eyes fixed on me.

Asked for names, I answered:

"Marco Saint-André."

"But I mean you!" she snapped, eyes wide.

"My name isn't Ulises," I insisted.

"Sinbad! Ulysses! Marco Polo! Aren't those all names of the same traveler?" she said, waving her hands.

"No," I answered, confused, "those are entirely different names."

I had no idea about her literary references, which were, to me, only strange words. From then on, her manner toward me was icy, as though I had humiliated her. Dropping me at home, she filed her complaint with my mother.

"When someone calls you by your last name, you answer right away!" Adelia scolded me. "Those children got home late because of you!"

Her anger was a mystery; I didn't understand what I'd done wrong. Gradually I came to realize that adults assume children deduce judgments, when, as Locke teaches, we are a *tabula rasa*. That a surname like Saint-André might be exceptional in Bucaramanga is a fact experience and local society bear witness to, but one a five-year-old cannot discern, any more than he can the most basic arithmetic.

My dominant temperament, a mix of curiosity and boldness, gave me standing in class. My classmates consulted me about their problems, and I became an oracle who improvised according to whatever my imagination supplied. One day, a pale-faced boy came up to me.

"I didn't bring my smock for watercolor class," he said. "The teacher's going to punish me, put me in the corner with Simón el Bobito's dunce cap. What should I say?"

"Say you left it on the school bus," I advised him, remembering the excuse an older student had used on the van.

Miss Teresa, a woman with a soft but firm voice, accepted the excuse, and the boy got to paint without punishment, his hands stained with color like a trophy. But cunning breeds envy, all the more when it's exposed to adults. During a recess, while I talked with my classmates under a tree, Ovidio challenged me.

"I know what one plus one is," he said. "That's something you don't know. My dad taught me last night."

"You're making that up," I challenged him, more in play than in anger.

"Tell us, Marco, what is it?" he pressed.

I fell silent, thoughtful.

"It's two!" he exclaimed.

"Marco doesn't know everything!" Eugenia sang, echoed by the rest in a mocking chorus. "Marco doesn't know everything!"

"Someday I'll know!" I declared, over their laughter, feeling a growing humiliation at my shipwrecked confidence.

The humiliation repeated itself in the hallways of those dungeons, a shadow that blotted out the midday sun. In the courtyard, children kept playing, but I felt that every laugh hid a challenge. I decided to be shrewder, watch more, talk less. But school wasn't only games; it was also a place of strict rules, where the teachers, in their starched dresses and tall hairdos, seemed like guardians of an order I had to decipher.

One afternoon, while we painted in class, I spilled blue paint on my smock. Miss Teresa looked at me gently.

"Be more careful, Marco," she said. "Stains don't come out easily."

I nodded, but the stain remained despite my efforts to make it disappear with sink water at recess, a reminder that even small mistakes leave their mark.

"What happened?" my mother asked, seeing me come in with the smock in my hand.

"A boy threw his paint jar at me," I lied, afraid of a slap.

Adelia studied me, wondering whether she should go complain to my teacher.

"I'll see if I can get the stain out with baking soda, vinegar, and bleach."

Her miracle potion worked so well that a student teacher, believing I was wearing a brand-new smock, asked me how many I owned.

My first taste of social injustice came not long after. There was a collectible sticker album, the *matachos* (little cards), with drawings of Colombian founding fathers that we children traded like treasures. My parents, not great enthusiasts of print media, gave me a sheet with fifteen cards, one of them extremely rare: a profile of Bolívar that gleamed like gold. Seeing that some kids traded unique cards for three or four common ones, I decided to negotiate. On the school van, I approached Jairo, a nine-year-old boy.

"I have a rare one," I told him, showing him the card.

Jairo, with calculating eyes, took it.

"How'd you get it?" he asked.

"It was in my sheet," I declared, proudly.

He turned his back and ignored me.

"Can I have my card back?" I insisted.

"What card?" he answered, tucking it into his pocket.

I wanted to protest, but his size intimidated me, and I sat down, muttering my helplessness. Foretelling so many of my future mistakes, my first negotiation had failed against such brazen theft. That night, at home, I tried to draw the lost Bolívar in my notebook, but the lines came out crooked, as though the card's soul refused to return.

Miss Teresa read us in class the fable of the little stick that breaks alone, but bundled together with others becomes unbreakable:

A kind grandfather one day called out: "Come, my children, listen, please."

He handed them a thin twig, slender as thread: "Break it now, it'll be easy as pie!"

Each child, crack!, snapped it in two, laughing and saying: "Look how fast!"

Then the grandfather bundled six twigs together, tying them tight, until they held firm.

"Now try it, break this bundle." The children twisted and pulled… it wouldn't break!

The grandfather said: "Do you see now, my children? Alone, you're weak. But together, no one can hurt you, because unity always stands beside you."

"If someone offends you, the best answer isn't silence, or revenge," Teresa said calmly. "It's to come together and protest as one, like those little sticks."

Inspired, I formed a gang with Ovidio, Héctor, Nelson, and Darío, boys whom Edward, the thundering giant of a bully, had already offended with head-thumps, or by stealing their snacks at recess.

"We trust you," Ovidio told me, his eyes shining. "Tell us what to do."

We confronted Edward at recess, under the blazing sun.

"What are you eating?" Ovidio asked him, as Edward drank a soda and ate potato chips.

"What's it to you?" he snapped.

"If you don't hand it over," Nelson cut in, his face hardened, "we'll kick you."

"Get lost, you brats, if you don't want me to crush your baby skulls," Edward threatened.

"What's your name?" I asked him.

"Edward," he answered.

"Weren't you the one who stole my Simón Bolívar card?" I pressed, remembering his abuses.

"Card number 1?" he shouted. "Don't lie, kid!"

"We're going to punish you," Nelson declared.

We attacked him with punches and kicks. Edward hit Ovidio, but a punch of mine to his stomach knocked the wind out of him. Héctor, with his thick eyebrows, pulled his hair mercilessly. We took his snack and ran off laughing. The next day, Edward handed over his food without a word. We extorted six other older kids, who ran crying to Remedios's office to file

complaints against us, but neither she nor the other Normal teachers, in their starched dresses, believed such fragile-looking children could be the terror of recess.

Only Teresa, with clear sight, pulled me aside.

"Forget about the fable of the little sticks, and don't abuse anyone," she told me. "You're earning the teachers' resentment."

I nodded, not fully understanding, her voice offering the best advice against what she considered my impulsiveness, but which, in truth, for a boy who attended Sunday Mass punctually, was no different from the same thirst for justice Jesus showed against the temple's moneylenders. The gang became my refuge, where the rules were ours, not the teachers' or the adults'.

In the neighborhood, things changed too. There, games grew rougher, fights more real. Gino and Berta were my constant companions, but also rivals. We'd pick up rocks from the street and threaten to throw them, but some ancient rule held us back, as though we knew crossing that line would bring something more serious. One afternoon, I pondered that inhibition, sitting on the alley curb, watching ants march in a line. I wondered what would happen if Berta got hurt. Seized by curiosity, I reacted the moment she insulted me:

"Marco, beauty-queen face!"

I raised a rock and threw it. The limestone chunk struck her cheek; blood welled up, transforming her furious face into tears. A deep regret overcame me. Why

had I hurt my friend? I ran toward her, but Gino shoved me back, his eyes full of rage.

"Look what you did!" he shouted.

Berta cried, blood running down her chin, staining her dress. Neighbors took her to the dispensary, and three stitches closed the wound, three stitches that wounded my own soul, my actions weighed down with guilt. My mother, furious upon finding out, punished me with no dessert for a month.

"You can't hurt others, Marco," she told me. "Their life isn't a game."

Atonement for my remorse came the following Thursday, when neighbors piled up multicolored stones to pave their front garden. Trying to climb them, drawn by the adventure, the stones rolled beneath my feet and I fell flat on my face. The ground bit into my forehead, and I tasted grit and dust in my mouth, a mix of powder and fright. Mamá lifted me from among the stones and led me to the kitchen. There, following an ancient custom—a blend of indigenous knowledge and remedies brought by conquistadors who arrived with no medicine at all—she squeezed half a lemon over the wound and ran the warm flat side of a knife across it. The burning was intense, as though the metal seared the fear before the skin itself, but the bleeding stopped. Days later, a scab formed on my forehead, and, when it fell off, left a faint scar, still visible to anyone who looks closely: a thin trace of lighter skin, memory of that Thursday when I was marked forever.

"Wounds don't forget, Marco," she said, her voice firm but tired.

"Forget what?" I insisted.

"Your foolishness. They're marks of the final judgment," she answered.

That phrase struck me like a psalm, another warning against my detestable impulsiveness. The guilt over hurting Berta became a shadow that gnawed at me, rising up in the alley whenever I ran.

At kindergarten, the following days were a whirlwind of small acts of childish revenge. Some children looked at me warily, as though the stone I'd thrown at Berta had marked not only my forehead, but their memory of me too. But Berta bore no scar, which is a blessing, as Hone Sue, a Korean woman with dreamy eyes, would later reveal to me in Philadelphia, since the face maps out each person's destiny.

In 2009, sitting on stone benches in front of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, beneath the Avenue of the Flags, Hone Sue spoke to me in a charming English.

"I read faces," she said. "In Seoul, that was my work: reading faces. In Korea, parents rush to heal children's facial wounds, because a scar on the cheek foretells success, but one on the forehead signals a fatal fall."

"And this one?" I asked, pointing to a barely visible mark.

"You will suffer a fatal fall," she declared. "But another mark balances it out," she added, studying my face. "I don't understand—you should have died…"

I nodded, recalling my fall at age eight.

"What's your profession?" she asked.

"Film director, writer…" I answered.

"I see success in your jaw and lips, but the path won't be easy," she said. "Purging harm is a blessing."

I nodded, taking in the Philadelphia skyline with my eyes.

"May I offer you some advice?" she asked, noticing my thoughts.

"I respect all advice," I said.

"Don't marry either an American or a European woman," she told me. "They want to impose their own desires. You're the kind of man who has to determine his own life."

"I think it's too late for that," I cut in.

"You love her for her docility," she replied, "but the day will come when you have nothing left to teach her; she'll impose her will."

"Am I her teacher?" I asked.

"Not only hers," she determined, "but of many young people, children, and adults, though nothing conventional."

We stood beneath the fir trees, while Anaïs talked with her friend Cleo, visiting from France for the summer.

In a burst of nostalgia, I found Berta, in 2009, sitting with her mother on the block of my childhood. She received me warmly, but with no refreshments, since she hadn't been to the market. We recalled our old escapades with the familiarity of those who preserve their childhood, but her eyes avoided mine, because of intrigues certain UNAJ faculty had wedged between us, a subject for another novel.

David was at the Geographic Institute's office, writing up a report from his recent survey trip to Mogotes, when a soccer match on the side street stopped short before the imposing sight of a 1971 Ford Custom 500, its black-and-white bodywork bearing the Taxis Magallanes sign. It arrived distracted, its bumper scraping Don Ernesto's '65 Dodge. The screech of metal made us all turn.

From the rearview mirror, Matías, my father's former driver, winked at me, his crooked smile like a scar.

"The earth always collects, little boss," he said, his voice low but heavy with resentment.

In the back seat, Luis and Asdrúbal looked at me with the faces of criminals. The taxi drove off, leaving a cloud of carbon monoxide, but Matías's wink stayed etched in my mind, a sign of something more serious than a simple scrape. At home, helping my mother set the table, I thought about Matías. His gesture was an ominous event, the outline of a threat to the world I had already grown used to. I tried to tell Adelia, but she was busy, cutting onions with a knife that glinted under the light.

"Don't bother me with your fantasies, Marco," she said. "I have enough on my hands with lunch."

Eugenia, with her perfect braids and almond eyes, had rejected my lollipops months earlier.

"I don't want your silly lollipops, Marco," she'd said, her laugh sharp as a metal ruler, cutting deeper than the rejection itself.

Another day, Edward shoved me to the ground, flanked by three giants.

"I have my own gang too!" he shouted, raising a fist.

"Edward!" I heard Teresa behind him.

"He wanted to rob us!" Edward said, turning his aggression into tears with theatrical ease.

"I don't want to see any gangs at recess," Teresa sighed, impatient.

The school turned into a war zone. Every recess was a battle, every class a siege. Teresa, with her fairy-godmother voice, was the only one who seemed to understand that we children weren't merely mischievous, but small explorers of a world we had only just begun to sketch. One afternoon, while we gathered up the crayons, she spoke to me quietly.

"Marco, you're smart, but not everything gets solved by settling scores," she said. "Sometimes you have to let things go. It'll save you trouble."

The loving cadence of her words made me happy for several days, during which I tried to take her lesson to heart.

June 1975 brought a heat that made the air shimmer over the asphalt of El Diamante. The games grew more intense, as though the sweltering weather stirred our spirits. Sergio led with a defiant glint in his eye, his easy laugh now tinged with boldness. Abhad, calculating, sketched out strategies in the dirt with a stick, like a miniature surveyor. Berta, her forehead wound now healed, played with a contained fury, kicking the ball with a force that spoke without words.

Chinita, at five, joined in bravely, chasing after the ball with a laugh that was a song of innocence dispelling the tension. The alley, with its cracked cement and rain puddles, was our kingdom, but also the place where those idyllic afternoons dissolved at dusk, when the sun painted the sky orange and red, as though the city burned in its own memories.

One afternoon, playing cops and robbers, Matías's taxi reappeared, parked like a wolf at the end of the alley. Matías rolled down his window and watched me without greeting. I turned my face away, nervous, my heart pounding like a drum.

"I don't like that man," Berta said, touching her forehead, as though Matías reopened an invisible wound.

"He's an invading giant," César replied, alluding to Ultraman. "He looks like one of his monsters."

Gino, bravely, approached, but Matías drove off, leaving a cloud of smoke that made us cough. The image of the taxi stayed in my mind, a ghost among my fears. I tried talking about it with Sergio, but he just shrugged.

"He's just a taxi driver," he said. "My dad says you shouldn't fear people who work, only lazy people who steal."

But I knew Matías wasn't just a taxi driver. There was something in his gaze, in his wink, that spoke of things I couldn't decipher, but which I felt as a threat.

That afternoon, my Nonita Kuki arrived with her little plastic suitcase, its pressure-clasps shaped like beetles, shielded beneath an umbrella. I watched her

walk from the corner, her thick, curly black hair, her curuba-colored dress, thick as curtains, her worn patent-leather shoes, her uneven steps on bowed legs. I ran into her arms, leaving my friends without so much as an apology.

"My little one!" she said, tenderly.

"Nonita!" I answered, carrying her suitcase with great effort.

Adelia welcomed her with curdled milk, a dessert that smelled of home. That night, David came home late, his boots caked in red mud, checking his bag to make sure his service revolver was inside. Adelia watched him from the kitchen, her eyes carrying a silent complicity.

"Tell us what's going on, David," Kuki said during dinner. "Nothing is impossible for God."

"The old *chulavita*, Matías Argüello, Doña Kuki," David answered. "It's not the same living off a taxi as off a government salary, with per diems, hotels, and restaurants as bonuses."

"And why does he want revenge?" Kuki asked.

"He disobeyed me when I told him not to drive drunk," David said. "The worst part is he might harm my children."

"I'm going to pray a novena so God takes those criminals into his arms," Kuki said, seriously, making my parents laugh.

"It's no joke," she replied, disapproving of their teasing. "When the Vegas tried to burn our house down for protecting a Sotamonte, I prayed to Saint Gabriel, and you already know how that ended."

"With a bullet to the head," Adelia nodded, seriously. "We weren't laughing at you, Mamita, but at the way you say it."

"Those bandits who threaten with death, to death my Lord condemns them!" Kuki laughed.

I wanted to tell them about the man in the taxi, but Papá cut me off:

"You be quiet!"

"Don't butt into adult conversations," Adelia seconded.

Their words meant an exclusion that eclipsed my curiosity.

At school, whenever Teresa stepped out, we'd erupt into shouting, like at dance clubs where drunk adults briefly return to their childhood. Mystics say God sings and dances as He creates the universe, and Christ asks us to become like children to enter Heaven. And yet, my days weren't entirely innocent. Perhaps because of my gang—the same one that had thrashed Edward—or because of an episode with my cousin Luna, daughter of Aunt Eustaquia, so aristocratic, so gentle-mannered, who always visited me on my birthday and at Christmas. Aunt Eustaquia, a teacher at the Normal, avoided being my instructor and enrolled Luna in a different class, no doubt fearing my temperament.

During one of the riots then shaking the UIS—with clashes between students and the police, and improvised incendiary devices—the teachers kept us sheltered in a classroom until the unrest passed.

I proposed to Luna that we explore the school.

"We don't have permission," she protested, hugging her doll.

"No one will notice," I insisted.

We ran through empty hallways, laughing, until we reached a stone wall marking the school's boundary. Luna grew anxious and wanted to go back. I led her back to the classroom, but Remedios was waiting for us with a metal ruler, her look fierce. She struck me three times with it in front of terrified children, while Luna escaped punishment. I cried, one of the last victims of corporal punishment in schools.

A week later, Remedios called me into her office, crammed with notebooks.

"You're intelligent, Marco, but I have to label you," she said. "Rules punish children who ask too many questions. Without punishment, the world would fall apart."

I tried to talk about Eugenia, about the *matachos* card, about the adventure with Luna, but the words tangled in my throat. Her pity hurt more than her anger. Decades later, reading Michel Foucault, I would come to argue that schools—like barracks or prisons—are not temples of knowledge, but factories of discipline. There, children are tamed out of their primordial purity to learn obedience, and, when necessary, the hypocrisy that lets one survive within the rules. We are taught to feign understanding, to silence disagreement, to coexist with the law without ever fully believing in it. Curiosity, that first fire, is subjected to order; and whoever resists learns to disguise his rebellion beneath the mask of the good student. Remedios's, Adelia's, and David's rules

maintained an apparent order, but their rigidity was a discomfort that pricked at me, as though they were watching not my actions, but my very thoughts.

Another afternoon, playing alone, kicking a soda-bottle cap around like a ball, a whir grazed past me. A dull blow knocked me down; my knee scraped, my mouth tasting of iron. A bicycle stopped. I recognized Luis at once, from Matías's taxi, who smiled at me, baring his fangs.

"My fault. Forgive me? Now it's my duty to take you to the hospital," he said.

I glimpsed, from a distance, Matías and Asdrúbal in that taxi, confirming my worst suspicions. Before his hand could grab my shirt, I pulled back and jumped the gutter, nearly losing my balance, plunging into the hillside brush, where I felt the bushes like thorns.

I stayed there, hidden among the cave of branches we used as a hideout, for a couple of hours, during which I heard a baby crying, as though it had been abandoned.

Before dusk, the hour my parents came home, I climbed the hill and looked out at Bucaramanga's Viaduct, that fourteen-legged colossus over the La Iglesia stream. Below, a crowd surrounded a figure beneath a sheet.

"She's alive!" they were shouting.

La Crónica and *Flanco Conservador* would repeat that failed suicide in stark headlines Adelia forbade me from reading, but which the neighbors read aloud, not without a certain morbid relish, for nearly a month, at Don Ernesto's shop:

SHE JUMPED AND AGONIZED FOR EIGHT HOURS

A young woman, in an act of revenge against her boyfriend, who had left her for another after calling her fat, threw herself off the García Cadena Viaduct, with such misfortune that she landed on her feet and survived, her bones broken and stacked beneath her skin like an accordion, alongside her bruised organs.

The unfortunate woman, in an act that baffles forensic doctors, was still able to breathe for eight more hours, screaming silently, gripped by her agony, since her vocal cords had been destroyed with her very first cries—terrifying shrieks of terror that chilled the blood of those who heard them for nearly half an hour.

Eyes red with agony, a priest administered her last rites, which comforted her parents and her repentant boyfriend. "She is a suicide who has reconciled with God in her agony," was the comment of Father Rueda Cancino, who will officiate her funeral tomorrow.

The bridge, with its low railings, was a temptation, a barrier separating, by a single step, the border between life and death, the dilemma of to be or not to be. I thought I heard Luis's bicycle, but eventually realized it was only the wind.

A week later, Diego, the baby-faced troublemaker, came to blows with Hortensio. Blood ran from his nose, echoing my own fall.

Sergio tried to calm them down.

"Stop, Hortensio! It's not worth it!"

Hortensio, furious, ran after Diego, who fled, laughing.

"Come back here, coward!" Hortensio shouted.

The blood on the pavement was a reminder of my trauma with Berta.

Matías, with his sons, reappeared, always parked on the corner.

"I already told you not to be afraid of them," Sergio said. "He's a taxi driver who's chosen this block for his fares. Yesterday they took my mother downtown to San Andresito."

My father was coming home late those days, his conversations with my mother growing tenser. One night, I overheard him muttering about some scheme, an embezzlement at the land registry office that every one of his predecessors had signed off on: "they want me to sign off on an expense bigger than what's on their invoices." The word "invoice" got tangled up, in my mind, with the crooked line of Matías's mouth.

Teacher Remedios called me in again. My classmates asked why that woman kept summoning me so often, when I wasn't even her student.

"Why do you scream when Teresa leaves?" she asked, as soon as I sat down at her desk.

I couldn't explain to her that we all screamed, that in her anger she confused the shouts of Ovidio or Héctor with my own.

Our first school year ended with a game in the alley. Sergio proposed a savior character who would pretend to be a policeman but turn the thieves into good people. I wanted to be that redeemer, since I alone

was friends with everyone. I talked it over with my friends from the block and the side street, uniting their disparate characters.

Suddenly I felt a wave of internal heat and an uncontrollable weakness, until, feeling pain in my bones, I collapsed to the ground, gasping. My friends carried me home, where my parents called a doctor who diagnosed measles.

"He needs to stay in bed for a week, with a red light, shut in, without moving," he said.

In the dim light I saw my father's nervous face, Matías's macabre wink, Berta's blood, now mixed with that of the car thief, Remedios's gleaming ruler. My *tabula rasa* filled with lines that overwhelmed me like highways whose destination was uncertainty.

The measles fever kept me in bed, watching shadows dance for another day on the ceiling, under the red light. I dreamed of the Viaduct turned into a fourteen-tentacled monster crushing the buildings of Bucaramanga in its path, until I, pressing the capsule of Ultraman, grew inside my metal suit and defeated him with my laser beams; of Matías's taxi, suddenly speaking to me through its giant square mouth, warning me it didn't want to run me over, but that they were forcing it to; of the furious stone I'd thrown at Berta, now claiming it was the same one that had cut my scarred forehead with a knife, in an act of disfigurement laughable compared to that of Michael Strogoff evading the Tartars; of Eugenia's blue eyes, now belonging to a sinister clown-girl who beat me with three wooden boards until I fainted.

In the neighborhood, the games went on without me, but Sergio visited me one day, bringing an inflatable leather ball.

"We miss you, Marco," he said. "It's not the same without you."

His smile expressed friendship, but also affection, and I took his hand with that innocence only children that age truly know.

"I missed you too!" I said, nearly crying.

"Let's go play!"

When I recovered and went back to the alley, the landscape seemed different, as though the fever had changed the colors of the neighborhood.

The houses, their walls peeling, seemed older; the almond trees, taller. And Matías was still there, his taxi parking on the corners, until someone hired him for a fare.

"Little boss!" he shouted at me.

I looked at him, bewildered, not knowing whether to talk to him or run.

"How old is Chinita now?" he said, winking at me.

"Four…" I said, showing him my fingers, the way Miss Teresa had taught me.

He let out a contemptuous laugh and walked off without saying goodbye.

The echo of his laughter was a threat that left an open wound, a question my spirit, I sensed that night, would not be able to decipher until we were safe in another neighborhood, or in adult life.

Chapter 5. The Christ and the Floor Tile

Back at school, they took the traditional kindergarten photo, in which I can be seen smiling with my big teeth and my wide-open eyes, holding a box of LEGO bricks. Below my picture is the whole kindergarten class; we're all smiling, because we were still happy. How short childhood is in this valley of tears! The photograph, hanging in the hallway of the Escuela Anexa, was a mosaic of children's faces, Bucaramanga's sun reflecting off our sweaty foreheads, a memory of days that seemed eternal but had already begun to fade. The courtyard air smelled of hot cement and freshly cut grass from the garden, where daisies grew through the cracks like tiny suns resisting the heat. Miss Teresa had congratulated me, because I'd completed all the homework we'd been assigned.

"Good work, Marco," Teresa told me, her voice like a crystal-clear waterfall, patting my shoulder. "Your drawings are the most colorful in the class."

Her words were more than well-deserved praise; they were an elixir against the insecurity that overwhelmed me, a rock to cling to in a river of swift currents, whose rules I couldn't decipher. Then we watched the parents file past the classroom to meet privately with our teacher; each one collected their child with a hug and left to celebrate the beginning of our first vacation. The murmur of adult voices mixed with children's laughter, a whirlwind echoing across the

cement courtyard, where the heat made the air shimmer. That year the National Front had ended, and the country enjoyed a period of relative peace that made a measure of social progress possible. My parents, like so many other Colombians, had benefited from the real estate boom, which had let them buy the house in El Diamante II, a neighborhood of freshly paved avenues and colonial houses, where the mango trees still gave shade and we children ran free, unsupervised, until the sun set the sky ablaze in every color, as though the city were the stage for a biblical revelation.

"And why not the Terrazas neighborhood?" Aunt Eustaquia asked my mother, her voice calm, with that affectionate spontaneity she used for pointing out flaws. "It's close to Cabecera, which is the best neighborhood in the city. El Diamante II is outside the Bucaramanga plateau."

My mother didn't answer her, but later, in the kitchen, peeling potatoes with a knife that gleamed under the light bulb, she told my father:

"El Diamante is quiet, David," Adelia said, her voice firm but tired. "The house is spacious, with its garage arch and its gleaming tile roof. In the courtyard we could build an apartment tower in five or ten years. What more could we want?"

"It's a modern house, Adelia," David nodded, adjusting his tie before leaving for work. "Colonial, yes, but with room for the children. We wouldn't have found anything like it in Terrazas."

The house, with its white church-like façade straight out of the American West, and its tall window

looking out over the viaduct from our roof, was our home: a castle where my mother reigned, and a ring where her discontent surfaced first as muttered complaints and then as threats, distilling a bile that spread with its dying glow into the yellow light seeping through the cracks at dusk, coating the plastic-covered furniture, a glossy sign of a modernity that defied dust and absorbed a thin layer of unease that Matilde diluted in vain, polishing it with wax every morning.

The children filed out one by one, their laughter echoing across the courtyard, and though I saw my mother outside waiting, she wasn't received until last, and it was to lead her, along with me, to the office of the dreaded teacher Remedios.

"You can play with the LEGOs while I talk with your mommy," Remedios told me, with a smile as manufactured as it was exaggerated, her tortoiseshell glasses gleaming under the light.

Trusting Teresa's words, I sat down to play, stacking red and blue blocks into a tower I imagined as a castle, the wax scent of crayons still clinging to my hands. Remedios led Adelia into the adjoining room, closing the door with a click that echoed in the silence. Through the glass window I watched her wave her hands in the air, clutching her head in desperation and rage. I grew anxious, my LEGO tower wobbling like my heart, the blocks falling with a clack, clack that echoed my fear. Then, at something my mother said, which I couldn't make out since I saw her from behind, Remedios smiled and sent Adelia off with a hug that seemed sincere. My mother took my hand, serious,

without a word, and led me to the school entryway, where we waited for a taxi, while I hummed the last song Miss Teresa had taught us, my voice trembling to fill the silence—a playful little tune about washing clothes on the rooftop, and about someone growing plump.

"Good thing your grandmother left yesterday for my sister's house," were Adelia's only words, her voice as cold as the tile floor that creaked beneath our steps.

Arriving home, my mother took one of my father's belts and led me to the only empty room, a space of bare walls and harsh echo, where every sound seemed to grow louder, as though the air itself awaited a memorable punishment. She turned the lock and began whipping me without a word. I screamed, startled, unable to understand what was happening. Each blow wounded me like death itself, since at five I didn't know that beatings don't kill, that the body forgets them. But more than the physical discomfort, what wounded me was discovering that the person I loved most treated me like the most hated of beings.

"An antisocial child!" Adelia shouted, her voice broken with rage. "That's what teacher Remedios said! A lost boy, no respect for authority! A burden! A budding gang member, a vandal!" she repeated the words with a fervor that wasn't hers, but a reflection of the fear and the respect she felt for authority. "I wish I'd never given birth to you! Maladjusted! That's how the doctors at the Normal see you! Having to hear from

a teacher," she added, nearly trembling, "that if I don't correct you, your soul will suffer the torments of Hell!"

Adelia burst into sobs, right as my own crying had turned into choking gasps. But her suffering gave way to her fury. I curled up against the window, hands clenched, as though I could reach it and flee that torment. But the belt lashes continued for what felt like an eternity, during which I felt the air escape me, my lungs bursting with my raw moans, until my skin began to bead with hundreds of small red points that, as I was dragged across the tiles, left a dark stain. That crimson gave Mamá pause; she feared she'd gone too far; she turned and left as quickly as, years later, I would watch the supposed "mother" of Norman Bates walk away from the bathroom where she'd just stabbed her victim.

I thought I was dying of suffering and didn't move until night covered me in darkness and I heard my father come home. He turned on the light and reproached me for my behavior at school; his contorted expression was a reminder that a beating breeds contempt, not only in the one who strikes us, but in those who approve of it.

That was the beginning of ten years of beatings and refined punishments, of which the first five were, for me, a hell that neither Dante with his infernal circles, nor Bosch with his monstrous delusions, could ever emulate. Or is hell not precisely that place where one wishes to die, and cannot? In Swedenborg's account, the sinner suffers eternal murders for being unable to recognize the resurrection of the dead; in mine, I

suffered in my innocence out of fear of suffering those very punishments, not once a day, but constantly.

Because just as my mother and father punished me, they also loved me, giving me everything I needed to continue my studies, feeding me three times a day, buying me the finest clothes. Nor was I a child beaten to death, or sexually abused, as so many authors of contemporary fiction have described in their novels. But in my pain and sensitivity I would rather have been killed, or abused, than to have endured the anguish and loneliness that made my childhood a torment with no way out; whoever dies escapes this world's sorrows without anyone blaming him for causing his own misfortunes, and whoever is abused finds, at least, a form of company, as the character in John Patrick Shanley's *Doubt* expresses it: the mother of the supposedly abused boy, who, in tears, cries out that sexual abuse is nothing compared to the contempt that boy suffered from those around him.

Years later, in a series of visions, I came to understand that those sufferings had been the harshest spiritual trial: enduring the betrayal, the incomprehension, and the cruelty of those I loved most, just as Christ endured them for all of humanity, always offering love and forgiveness, seventy times seven times seven. I understood then that I had chosen that ordeal myself, as expiation, for my false promises to the Lamb of God, since—yes, it would be revealed to me in 2022—I had already denied Him three times, in another life.

And if the suffering of those beatings—so real, so immediate, so much a part of the hell of childhood—did not turn me into a beast of resentment, it was thanks to my simple faith, to my unshakable belief in His comfort and His resurrection. In Sunday Mass I found the only certainty possible: that His eternal Kingdom and His Beatitudes justified all human suffering.

I remember that vacation brought more beatings and punishments. My parents began arguing over me, since Adelia asked David to whip me more severely.

"What do you want me to do?" David said one night, his voice tired, scrubbing a glass in the kitchen, water dripping like a clock.

"It's a problem, David!" she answered, striking the table with her palm. "Remedios says he's a social threat! We have to correct him now, or it'll be too late!"

At first David resisted, but since Adelia grew hostile toward him whenever he did, he took to appearing suddenly in my room with a belt and whipping me without explanation. I already knew the cause was Teacher Remedios's diagnosis. The blows fell like thunder, the leather whistling through the air, and I shrank into a corner, feeling my skin burn and my heart break, each lash another condemnation in the book of my sins, since I was told that my behavior violated the fifth commandment, to honor father and mother.

Adding insult to injury, my sister Gabriela began complaining about me over the smallest disagreements.

"Marco pushed me in the courtyard," she said one afternoon, her voice sugary, as we played with

blocks in the living room, surrounded by plastic soldiers scattered across the floor.

"That's not true!" I protested, but Adelia was already looking at me with fury, her eyes like embers.

"Go to your room," she ordered, not listening, pointing at the stairs.

The living room, with its polished wooden table and faded floral curtains, became a courtroom where I was always guilty. The only joy that came to our house then was the arrival of Morgan, a German Shepherd puppy, very friendly and playful. His black eyes shone like marbles, and his fur smelled of damp earth when he ran through the back garden, where the roses swayed in the wind and the birds sang at dusk. Papá built him a little wooden house in the yard, its slanted roof creaking in the rain, but I would bring him up to my room, where I played and talked with him, telling him my troubles as though he were a real friend.

"That dog doesn't understand you!" Gabriela grumbled from the doorway, hugging her plastic doll.

"He does understand me," I answered, "just without moving his lips."

"I'm going to tell my dad you bring him up to your room," she threatened, her voice sharp.

I said nothing, but at dinner David lectured me:

"Marco, dogs bring fleas and infections," he said, cutting his meat firmly, the knife scraping the plate. "You can only play with Morgan in the courtyard, or on the street."

Then a storm broke, with howling winds, the sky dark as a torn sheet. I heard Morgan howling pitifully

from his little house, a lament that pierced my chest like a dagger. Desperate over his wellbeing, I went to the door and considered going downstairs, when suddenly Adelia pushed it open and, with a tender face, told me:

"You have nothing to fear, Marco," she said, her voice soft for the first time in weeks, like an echo of the Teresa I missed so much. "I came to say goodnight."

Taking advantage of her sudden change of mood, I let her lead me to bed and tuck me in. She kissed my cheek, something she hadn't done in so many weeks, and, believing she wanted to be kind to me, I asked her:

"Mami, please let Morgan into the house," I said, my voice pleading. "He must be soaked."

"Little dogs have fur that makes them resistant to the rain," she answered with a smile, her eyes gleaming under the dim light.

I believed her and calmed down, lulled by the drumming of the rain on the roof. The next morning I took Morgan for a walk around the neighborhood, his paws splashing in the puddles; back home we played in the front garden, I threw him a rubber ball and he brought it back to me, his tail wagging like a fan, his happy bark the cry of complicity of a friend who promised I would never feel alone again. I had to go inside to use the bathroom, and when I came out, Morgan was gone.

"He got stolen," was my father's verdict, his voice calm, almost indifferent, as he reviewed some maps at his desk.

His calm struck me as suspicious. Hadn't he wanted him? I cried all day, my tears falling like the rain from the night before, but no one else seemed to care. Months later I learned Morgan had been adopted by a police sergeant, who, my father said, had grown fond of him. The pain of his absence left me a void that only Morgan will be able to fill again, the day I am no longer in this world myself. His loss was a wound that made me stop eating for a while; behind my parents' backs, I threw my plates of food into the trash without their noticing. I grew so thin and hollow-eyed that one day, having come from a beating by my father the night before, the teacher on duty noticed the marks on my legs and sent me to the school nurse.

"I can see you're undisciplined!" was the nurse's comment upon seeing my marks, letting out a laugh. "A good whipping is what you need if you don't behave!"

Then she examined my eyes.

"You have anemia!" was her diagnosis.

They called my mother, and for a month I had to eat, under her watchful eye, whole pounds of nearly raw liver. That experience convinced me to recover from the loss of my friend and go back to eating as usual.

Christmas came, and we gathered with my aunts and my Nonita Kuki in the courtyard, where the smell of custard and fritters floated from the kitchen, mixing with the pine scent of the tree Adelia had decorated with colored balls. November's bitterness gave way to December's fleeting joys, when liquor and music put everyone at home in good spirits. My parents gave me

an electric car track for Christmas, which we assembled diligently on December 25th with my cousins Mario and Jorge, my Aunt Carla's two blond sons. The little cars often flew off the track, buzzing like bees, but it didn't matter—they were there to move on their own with a remote control, their lights flickering in the dim living room. Nonita's sweet-corn *ajiacos* delighted us, and nothing was more charming than seeing the joy with which she watched me devour two or three of them with hot chocolate in the mornings and afternoons, the steam rising in spirals.

"Look at him, my little one, how he eats," Kuki said, her warm laugh filling the room, her wrinkled hands clapping. "This boy is going to be someone great, you'll see."

Her words were a balm, the comfort of a loving mother figure who hugged me every time she found me in the hallways of our house, a refuge in a world of belts and blame.

In February 1975 I started first grade, and I remember, greeting my classmates, the shock on several of their faces at seeing me, as though Remedios's stories had traveled all the way to their homes. We began with Spanish class. I asked the teacher from the Normal so many questions that she ended up ignoring me.

"Marco, let the others talk," she said, her voice sharp as thunder.

My nightmare then began with calligraphy class; we were given a notebook in which I had to trace continuous circles on my first page. Some deformity in my thumbs kept me from handling the pencil smoothly,

so my lines came out crooked, like the scrawl of a mess. I could drag my hand along, but the stroke was uneven, and the pressure smudged the pencil's graphite across the page, leaving a black smear that seemed to mock me. At the end of class the teacher held up the page of a boy named Kikito as an example of neatness and skill, and mine as a sample of every mistake we should avoid.

"Look at Marco's page," the teacher said, holding up my notebook, her voice a hammer. "This is not how it's done, children."

My classmates, used to my leadership in kindergarten, took the lesson as an excuse to laugh at me and point their fingers. Their laughter followed me, echoing across the playground. I could only stay silent and watch them with an anguished face: the weight of their mockery became an anvil I had to bear on my chest. I left class with my head down, gripped by a growing anxiety, the sun burning my cheeks as I wandered the courtyard wondering how to make my calligraphy strokes right. How would they punish me at home when they found out?

Around then, my parents started the business of a grocery store, a branch of IDEMA offering grains and provisions at lower prices than regular shops. My mother hadn't worked since 1969, when, to take charge of raising us, she had given up her teaching post, a position she'd secured after graduating in 1960 on the recommendation of the mother superior of her school. Rising inflation led my parents to accept her return to the workforce in 1972, but nothing discouraged

employers more than a woman who had interrupted her career to devote herself to the home.

It was then that my father turned to one of his old classmates from Colegio Santander, Senator Jácomo Mubarak, who urged him to file the paperwork to be awarded one of the branches IDEMA had created across Colombia to help farmers sell their produce without middlemen.

Within a week we saw the garage turned into a mini supermarket. Matilde now earned a higher salary for helping us, no longer only in the mornings, but all day, attending to the store's customers, her hands moving quickly between sacks of rice and beans, a cumbia keeping time with her movements on the radio.

"From now on you're going to sweep and mop the house," Mamá told me, pointing to the broom, which looked like a giant beside me.

"And my sister?" I protested, looking at Gabriela, playing with her doll in the living room. "Can't she at least sweep?"

"Your father says Gabriela can't do it, because those chores could damage her health later on, when she has children," Adelia answered, her tone as unyielding as the cement of the courtyard.

So, wielding those tools that dwarfed me, I managed as best I could to complete the household chores every afternoon, after coming home from school and having lunch. The harsh smell of soap and bleach mixed with the mud my father tracked in on his boots when he came back from a trip.

Every beating I got for failing to leave the house perfectly clean—an almost impossible task for me, with such oversized tools—convinced me that I was now the ugly duckling of that household: a punishment not only for my childish clumsiness, but for having been born a boy and not a girl, for carrying the grudge of a teacher who never once taught my class, or, as Calderón de la Barca would reveal to me years later, for having offended the Creator with the terrible crime of having been born at all.

One Saturday, closing up the shop, David took the plate with one of the unsold sponge cakes, broke it in two, and handed a piece each to Gabriela and me.

"I couldn't believe it!" I thought, biting into the cake, its sweetness filling my mouth like a treasure. "It was the first time in our lives we'd ever been given cake without it being someone's birthday!"

"We can't keep them for Monday," David explained, wiping his hands on a napkin. "So whatever's left unsold on Saturdays will be split between the two of you."

Another Saturday we'd had lentils with sausage for lunch, and the smell of the stew still hung in the dining room, a warm aroma that clashed with the correctional air of the house. It was Saturday, one o'clock sharp, and David had already retired to his room, as he always did, for his siesta. I followed him with a secret longing: there was one last slice of IDEMA honey cake left, that dark, moist bread I loved so much. Shyly, I approached the bed, where David was already dozing off, his heavy breathing filling the room.

"Papito, can I eat the slice of cake?" I asked, my voice barely a whisper.

He, half asleep, raised his hand slightly and murmured:

"Yes, but share it with Gabriela."

I ran down the stairs, excited, the slice's wrapping paper crinkling in my hands. In the kitchen, Matilde rinsed plates with mechanical vigor, and a muted cumbia played on the radio, its rhythm as slow as the midday heat. Gabriela played in the living room with her plastic soldiers, moving them as though they were an army. I walked in with the slice wrapped in paper and repeated David's words to her:

"We have to share it."

She looked at me with those bright eyes that feigned innocence. She smiled and, without hesitating an instant, put the whole slice in her mouth. She devoured it hungrily, as though trying to erase me from the split, not leaving a single crumb. I felt injustice choking me, a knot tightening my chest. I ran back upstairs and, sobbing, shook David by the shoulder.

"It was my sister!" I cried. "She ate my whole piece of cake!"

David opened his eyes, annoyed. He looked at me with dry anger, as though my crying were an insolence.

"Can't you see I'm napping?" he muttered, rubbing his eyes.

I tried to explain, but he'd already made up his mind. He got up, went downstairs with me, and headed

straight for the kitchen. There, Matilde, her apron still wet, confirmed what had happened:

"Yes, sir, Gabriela ate the whole slice," she said, drying her hands.

Then David turned toward the living room, and, from the doorway, looked at her: Gabriela was still on the floor, moving her toy soldiers with an insulting calm, as though nothing had happened. The scene was enough. David unbuckled his leather belt and whipped me furiously. Each blow inflamed my skin, and I screamed through tears:

"It wasn't me! It wasn't me!"

But he thundered, his voice hoarse:

"For waking me up, I'm going to whip you both!"

He turned to Gabriela. She barely flinched, and received a few blows so light they seemed fake. Until an accident happened: loosening the belt, the metal buckle swung, and, as David pulled it back, the prong lodged in Gabriela's forehead. The shriek she let out chilled my blood. I watched her cover her face with her hands, while blood trickled in a thin line down her white dress printed with tiny flowers, a consequence of the paternal and maternal correction that ruled our household. Matilde screamed in horror.

"My God, the girl!" she exclaimed, dropping a plate.

David, pale, scooped her up in his arms and ran to the garage. I followed him, trembling, my body still burning from the belt lashes, while the Jeep roared and hurled us down the neatly paved streets to the hospital.

In the emergency room, the smell of iodine and alcohol turned my stomach, a stench mixed with fear. Gabriela cried under the white light while a thick-glassed doctor stitched four sutures into her forehead. Then he looked at David seriously and asked:

"What exactly happened?"

David, without hesitation, lied:

"It was Marco. I was whipping him and he pushed my hand."

The doctor raised his eyebrows, adjusting his glasses.

"How old is this child?"

"Five," David answered, with composure, his voice as firm as cement.

I wanted to scream that it wasn't true, that it was all a lie, but my voice died in my throat, as though the weight of that invented guilt crushed me. In that instant I understood that I wasn't only being punished with blows: I was also being condemned with a lie that etched itself into my innocence like a scar. In the days that followed, that version spread like poisonous smoke. David told it to Adelia, then to relatives and friends. Soon I became "the wicked child," the brother capable of causing harm. Though at home they avoided discussing it in front of me, I knew what they whispered behind my back, their murmurs like the wind stirring the dead leaves in the alley.

And then, one night, came the definitive betrayal. We were on the porch, lit by yellowish bulbs that buzzed, while the adults laughed with glasses of aguardiente and a bolero played from inside, its

melancholic melody filling the air. Gabriela appeared in her nightgown, the stitches gleaming on her forehead like a trophy. One of the guests, a man with a thick moustache, said to her solemnly:

"You almost went blind, little girl."

I sat up, expectant, hoping she'd tell the truth.

"Yes," Gabriela said calmly, her eyes cold. "It was my brother who hurt me with the belt."

A murmur ran through the table, an echo of the laughter in the school courtyard. And she, with an icy confidence, finished:

"He grabbed the belt and hurt me."

I felt my whole world collapse. That lie grabbed me by the hair and smashed my face against the floor. From that night on, I had to endure Gabriela's skill at playing the victim. Painting me as the villain would become her most powerful weapon, and also the never-acknowledged source of her own misfortunes. I knew then, with a bitter certainty, that my role as Cinderella had been permanently established that afternoon, with the cruel flash of a blood-stained buckle.

My parents punished me by forbidding me to go out and play in the street with my little friends in the afternoons, something I always did from four to six, when the sun softened its heat and the alley filled with laughter. Instead I had to stay in my room, locked away, with an encyclopedia my father had bought us, *Vida Animal*. I still didn't know how to read, but I delighted in looking at the photos and drawings of every animal in the world. Images of roaring lions, soaring eagles, and slithering snakes were an escape, a world with no belts,

no invented guilt, where lines were free and lies impossible.

Adding to my unease, my parents' disputes grew worse that year.

"What's wrong with you?" my father would ask my mother when he saw her in a bad mood.

"Thinking about all the girlfriends you've had on your trips, while I sacrifice myself raising the children."

It was the same conversation, at least once a week. Reproaches and excuses followed one after another; my mother mentioned a puppy that had been given to her, which, she'd found out, was a gift from one of his mistresses in Capitanejo. I couldn't understand her words back then, until, years later, I understood that Morgan had been that puppy. My poor Morgan! Condemned to contempt from the very moment he arrived at our house, simply because someone told my mother he was a lover's gift!

My father countered every argument with an axiomatic dialectic that led me to believe my mother was unjust, stirring up those fights. The worst happened whenever my father had a few Black & White whiskies. My mother, unwilling to admit her narrative of living with an unfaithful husband was baseless, kept up her insults, sullen and distant, which exasperated my father to the point of despair. He would then start blaming me, saying he was going to whip me, because his refusal to do so was the cause of his bad mood.

He'd go upstairs and start pounding on my door, threatening to break it down, until my mother embraced him, crying, regretting having woken that beast every

man carries inside, telling him to calm down, to leave me be.

One Saturday night, my mother, made up, in a dark blue evening gown, her hair lacquered and teased in the fashion of the seventies, pulled me from my bed, her face twisted with anguish.

"Your father's gone mad!" she whispered. "Hide!"

We went down to the living room, where the iron door shook under blows and kicks, and she led me across the courtyard to the kitchen pantry, a damp little room built beneath the stairs.

"Bolt it from the inside!" she whispered, pleading.

My father threatened to break down the door, until my mother, after about ten minutes, during which, far from feeling afraid, I felt a growing curiosity about what was happening at our front door, opened it.

They had argued at a gathering with their friends, the Jaramillos, owners of the biggest house in El Diamante, where my mother had recounted her bitter experience hearing my teachers' predictions about my future.

"Marco is going to end up like his grandfather," she sobbed, alluding to the scandal of his death in a hotel on New Year's Eve. "Taking his own life!"

That was more than my father could bear. If there was one thing that enraged him, it was seeing the sacred memory of Jonás sullied, for whom he held the tenderest memories.

"They didn't kill him!" he stammered. "There was a boy who saw everything, up in a tree, and he testified! It was that woman who killed him!"

"Inventions of the insurance company!"

My father, driven mad, got up, swearing he was going to correct me with his fists, as he should have done long ago. The hosts, alarmed, reminded my mother he'd already had more than a liter of whisky in him, and promised to hold him back while she got me to safety.

My father came in shouting curses and insults against me, knocking over chairs and furniture. He climbed the stairs, and, walking into my room, found Gabriela crying.

"Where's Marco?" she sobbed, frightened.

My mother rushed to comfort her.

My father said nothing. The scene must have shamed him, because he stopped shouting and went to bed.

The next morning my mother knocked at the door; I woke up shivering. I had made an improvised bed out of little bags of dried pasta I'd found in a box. Trembling, I slid back the bolt, and Adelia wrapped me in a poncho and hugged me, a hint of indignation on her face. She then led me to her bedroom, where my father waited, his head bowed.

"I owe you an apology," he told me, clearing his throat. "The man from last night wasn't me. I lost my head."

"Yes, Papá," I said, in a weak voice, still unable to understand that first and only apology of my childhood.

The punishment stopped after two months, and I went back to playing with Guido, Berta, and freckled César. We played hide-and-seek in the alley, running between puddles and the shadows of the orange trees, counting to twenty while the sun warmed the asphalt, its heat rising in waves that blurred the horizon.

"Coming!" César would shout, covering his eyes against a rusted post.

I'd hide behind an empty tin barrel, my heart racing, as though the game were a magic portal into a world of elves and fairies. Then, through Guido, I met the sisters Charlie and Derlie, both from Bogotá, dressed in elegant wool clothes, a bit too warm for Bucaramanga, but shining, colorful, beautiful, like exotic flowers in the gardens of El Diamante. I was drawn to them at once and wanted to be their friend. They had a swing and a slide in their front garden, and I delighted in playing with them, the creak of the swing's chains a song in the air. However, lining up to go down the slide, Guido cut ahead of me and I protested.

"Hey, it's my turn!" I said, shoving him with my shoulder.

Charlie stepped in, her voice firm as a teacher's:

"Marco, you're not my friend," she said, her dark eyes fixed on me. "Guido is. If you don't like it, leave."

I stepped back, fearful, intimidated and humiliated.

One Sunday we went to a barbecue at my grandmother Elvia's house. My father took me to the market square, that labyrinth of zinc roofs and the smell of freshly chopped cilantro, where the stalls lined up over damp tiles, and vendors weighed goods on scale-plate balances with iron weights. He bought a whole capon, wrapped in brown paper and tied with twine, and several beef kidneys the butcher, with his Tramontina knife and striped apron, whitened in cold water inside an aluminum tub. My aunts picked out the yuca, its purple skin still caked with dirt, and Uncle Chico, with his grill-master's hands, declared himself in charge of the avocado salad with hot pepper, onion, and criollo lime.

Before heading back, my father announced he'd buy the sodas at the store, and asked one of his sisters to come with him. Jazmín looked at Lila, and Lila at Lucía, who finally passed the responsibility on to my cousin Clarisa, two years older than me.

On the way we passed the neighborhood church, its organ amplifying, through the loudspeakers, the funereal notes of a Bach fugue. Its organist—I thought at the time—must have been a very sad person, perhaps someone whipped by his parents and scorned by the girl he loved, as I was, since never before or since had I heard the notes of an instrument so slow, so mournful, so drawn out.

Clarisa was a mischievous, cheerful girl, very affectionate with my father, whom she hugged as though she were his own daughter, but a bit brusque, the opposite of my mother's and sister's gentleness. She

used to tell me we were sweethearts, which made me nervous, since my mother didn't get along with her, and had warned me several times that she'd punish me if she so much as saw us holding hands.

Clarisa told us we were going to the neighborhood's "regular store": shelves of varnished wood, glass jars of Noel cookies, a calendar from the Santander lottery, a Roberval balance scale beside the register, the yellowed portrait of Cochise, champion cyclist, nailed to the wall.

The shopkeeper, a moustached man with a pencil behind his ear and a cream apron dusted with sugar, stacked a crate of returnable Col-Cana bottles—the local version of dark colas—and another of Kola Champagne Postobón onto the counter. He flipped through his black-covered notebook and, with a shrewd look softened by a friendly gesture, said:

"Should I put it on the tab? Oh, no, I'm sorry! You already owe 102 pesos, and the most we can extend credit for is a hundred. I can only fill the order once you settle the balance. Tell your aunts that in this life, you have to work to eat!"

"But today it's my uncle doing the shopping," Clarisa stammered, her voice cracking from the humiliation.

My father took off his linen hat, asked to see the notebook, and, running his index finger down the figures, said:

"I'll pay it all off. And no more credit under my mother's name."

The *ding* of the register seemed to close the matter. He added two bags of ice for his whisky, half a case of Águila beer, and a bottle of eggnog "to toast the prosperity of the Saint-Andrés."

Clarisa seized that window of opportunity and asked my father for a Colombiana soda for herself, and another for me.

"For the helpers," the shopkeeper said, his eyes lit up by the sale.

At my grandmother's house, the inner courtyard looked like a picture postcard: red-and-cream hydraulic tiles, a laden lemon tree, geranium pots on a cement bench, a long table with a plastic checkered tablecloth, amber-colored Duralex glasses, and an Imusa fan buzzing. Over the brick grill, the grate turned white with heat: yucas wrapped in banana leaf, the capon marinated in garlic, cumin, and beer, and the kidneys Uncle Chico turned over with steel tongs.

We had barely unloaded the crates when my father called Grandmother Elvia and Aunts Lila, Jazmín, and Lucía into the living room, where a chrome-tube sofa set with red vinyl cushions gleamed under the light.

"I don't want you going through those humiliations again," he said. "If you need groceries, call me and I'll do the shopping. But no more credit than you can pay off. These are the rules, and whoever doesn't like them can leave."

My grandmother squeezed her rosary and, after a brief silence, nodded. Lila followed suit; Jazmín admitted that sometimes credit "saved them"; Lucía—

bell-bottoms, polka-dot silk blouse, Maja perfume—leaned against the doorframe, amused.

"Fine," my grandmother finally conceded. "We'll do as you say."

The conversation drifted, as it always did whenever Lucía was in the mood, toward film:

"Have you seen *When Schoolgirls Sin?*, the German film?" she asked, savoring the title. "It's breaking box-office records."

"Not yet," my father said, "but I've heard about it."

"Very good!" Uncle Chico cut in from the courtyard, fanning the coals with a bellows. "It's a documentary presented by some serious, elegant fellow who tells us how today's European girls have intimate relations with whoever they want, without regard to age, and whenever they please. They really know how to enjoy life! Here, meanwhile, we still live in fear of whatever the priest says!"

He let out a laugh, during which my father and mother exchanged impatient glances.

"Let's see if they stop forbidding me to have friends," Aunt Lucía finished, fanning herself with an issue of *Vanidades*. "Since I'm already eighteen, I went to the premiere with a friend."

My father stood up and cleared his throat, uncomfortable.

"The world may change, but in this house there are rules," David replied. "Virginity and decency aren't a fashion trend, and here you come home at the agreed hour. I don't want single mothers in this family."

"We're not Cinderellas," Lucía scoffed. "The party's just getting started at midnight. Besides, thanks to the Lleras, you can get contraceptives at any pharmacy now."

The grill crackled, and Uncle Chico announced the kidney was "just right," restoring the peace with his serrated knife and glass jars of sauce.

After a lunch full of laughter and camaraderie, at four o'clock sharp, in my grandmother's living room, they turned on the television and the black-and-white title card appeared: *The Twilight Zone*, a show competing for audience with *Mission: Impossible*, which aired at five.

The narrator's voice pulled us into that territory where the everyday turned itself inside out like a sock. I never forgot the nearsighted man who loved to read, like me, and wanted no one to bother him, not even his wife. When humanity perished, only he survived, along with his books, to enjoy them with "all the time in the world," until his glasses shattered on the steps of an empty library. I remember my rage and helplessness, since I no longer saw him, but myself, sitting there, reading the volumes of *Vida Animal*, with nothing and no one to bother me.

Another episode was the one about Maple Street, where suspicion among neighbors set the night ablaze; and the one about the bandaged woman whose "different face" was the only one that looked normal to us. Wasn't I like that woman, and weren't those deformed monsters the boys Eugenia, Charlie, and Derlie preferred?

From the very start I recognized the murky intentions of the alien who descended with a book promising "to serve man," which turned out to be a cookbook; and I broke into a sweat with the passenger who saw something stuck to the wing while everyone else called him insane, reliving my own anguish at the Anexa, when I tried in vain to convince Teacher Remedios that I wasn't a bad student.

That series was more than mere entertainment. I learned—better than anyone—that the world of imagination is no less real than this one. To me, that show was an oracle proving that I wasn't the villain of my own days, but the victim of my school and my parents, who, hearing my arguments, accused me of "an overactive imagination." They told me my explanations were made of the same stuff as my elves disguised as rats, and that Morgan telling me he didn't want to sleep outside the house was just another one of my inventions.

At Mass we recited that God was the creator of all things visible and invisible, and no other television program taught me that invisible world the way that episode of *The Twilight Zone* did, in which Robert Redford asked a wary old woman for shelter, only to later reveal that he was Death, and had come to take her with him.

Aunt Lucía, who seemed to take nothing seriously, took my father's words to heart: a year later she packed her things after a Saturday night out and got into the Ford Galaxy of a divorced man, with whom she would live until she finished her university degree.

One afternoon I felt a burning in my throat, a warning rising like a signal. I got a fever, and once again fell bedridden, this time a victim of the mumps. I had to stay still, without moving, and the heat was such that I lay down naked, with only a sheet, sweat sticking to my skin like a second layer. On the second day, my room filled with visitors led by my mother.

"Your friends have come to visit you," she told me, her voice softer than usual.

I was glad to see Guido, César, and Berta, but even more so, Charlie and Derlie, their wool dresses shining even in the dim light of my room. I was answering their questions when suddenly Derlie said:

"You're holding onto that sheet so tight, Marco," she laughed, pointing at me. "Are you naked under there?"

"No," I said, gripping the sheet tightly.

She pulled at the sheet, and the other children joined in, laughing, until they'd exposed me with no pants or underwear on. They laughed, and I burst into tears, the tears burning my cheeks; then Adelia walked in, scolding them:

"With the mumps, you can't make him exert himself like that!" she said, covering me with the sheet, her voice an echo of authority.

I missed a week of classes, and by the time I came back, they'd already moved through the language lessons from the letter "m" to the letter "s." With "o," "p," and "q" I managed to understand them from repeated classroom comments, but for the rest of the year I couldn't figure out how to read "n" or "r." It was

only through great effort that I managed to deduce their use, though I kept misspelling words like "honrado" (honest) as "honrrado" for the rest of the course, which cost me a considerable drop in my grades, which otherwise would have been among the highest. The corrections in my notebook stood as evidence of my struggle to fit into a world that demanded perfection.

That year we didn't see Matías again, nor hear anything of him, until my father mentioned him to my mother during a meal, steam from a chanfaina stew filling the kitchen:

"Old Rueda told me Matías went to Bogotá to form a gang of criminals," David said, cutting a piece of meat with precision.

"And what if he becomes a guerrilla?" Adelia asked, her voice heavy with worry.

"He won't," David answered, shaking his head. "He was a *chulavita*, and there's nothing a communist detests more than the very squads that wiped out their Liberal bandits."

The ease with which I understood everything I was taught at the Anexa, despite my struggles with calligraphy, made me question my docility as a student, even as I reconsidered my parents' punishments toward me, their constant beatings.

The teachers had told my mother my notebooks were poorly written from simple, plain carelessness; my handwriting was large, uneven, and my hands sweated so much since the previous year's beating that the ink and pencil smeared, staining every page with that black smudge so typical of charcoal. So Adelia decided to

correct me with the belt. Every Monday I had to present her my "progress" in my Spanish, drawing, math, and calligraphy notebooks.

"This is a disaster, Marco," she'd say, flipping through my notebooks, her finger pointing at the smudges. "It's obvious you're not trying!"

Her scolding grew worse and worse; shouts and insults that ended with David taking off his belt and whipping me until the skin on my back, arms, and legs rose up, red and swollen, oozing. My screams were heartbreaking, but far from satisfying her fury, they only increased it.

"Shut up!" Adelia would shout, her voice like a whip. "If you keep crying, it'll be worse!"

I couldn't comply, which only deepened my torment, the physical suffering mixing with what I perceived as a growing contempt. Afterward I had to drag myself to my room, where Adelia had hung a Christ figure, the one she'd used as an unmarried woman, now replaced in her own room by a modern Italian porcelain Christ.

I would look at that Christ, cast aside by fashion, His serene copper face contrasting with the thorns at His temples, and wonder why He didn't save me from the belts, why I had to be, as the neighbors already said, the most punished child in the neighborhood.

Then David was sent away on assignment, gone for two months. That was a relief, since Adelia stopped checking my notebooks, a lost cause by then, as she told me bitterly one afternoon, regret in her voice:

"I don't have any illusions left about you!"

Because no matter how hard I tried to write beautifully, the results were disappointing.

How unfortunate are we who live with the helplessness of ordering our own limbs to do something seemingly easy for everyone else, yet impossible for ourselves! Only years later, in an interview given by Dudley Moore, the actor who played Arthur, the seductive millionaire, by then suffering from progressive supranuclear palsy (PSP), did I hear a phrase that expressed what I had felt at five years old:

"I suffer in a body that doesn't obey what I ask it to do…"

If only I'd had a patient teacher, the way Miss Teresa had been with me in kindergarten!

One afternoon I caught Adelia crying bitterly, a letter in her hands, the paper crumpled between her fingers.

"What's wrong, Mamita?" I asked her, my voice timid, standing in the kitchen doorway.

"I'm afraid your father has a mistress," she said, her voice broken, tears shining on her cheeks. "He's going to extend his assignment another month."

Her sadness moved me so deeply that that afternoon I wrote my first letter, using the phrases I'd learned in class, sitting in my room with a chewed-up pencil:

Papito, my mommy isn't being spoiled the way she should be, because you're not here. I'm asking you to come back now and not marry another lady. Here I take care of everyone at home, I sweep the courtyard and help Gabriela with her homework. Nonita is sad too, and little Gabriela doesn't have her papá to

hug anymore. Come soon, because I miss you so much. I love you with all my heart. Your son loves you very much. Marco.

I knew there was a mailbox at the corner store, so I folded the letter, its paper crinkling like a promise, and walked around the corner, hiding behind the fence in front of the entrance. As soon as the bespectacled lady who worked there went into her house, I jumped out from my hiding spot and dropped the letter in the mailbox. It had no recipient, no address, and certainly no postage stamp, but I didn't understand those details back then. To me, finding my father and delivering the letter was the postal service's job, so I went home very proud, sure I'd solved my mother's sadness, my step light, my chest swelling with having pulled my whole family out of trouble.

The school year ended with a marble dispute with my friend Sergio, in front of my house. I played with him as usual out in the street, the marbles gleaming like jewels in the sun, and lost the five I had, which enraged me, a heat rising in my chest.

"Sergio, give me back my marbles!" I protested, raising my voice, the leaves from the alley's trees clinging to my knees.

"Is that true?" my mother asked, working the register at the IDEMA store, her apron dusted with flour.

"No, Marco lost them playing," Sergio answered, holding the marbles in his hand.

My silence proved him right.

"You have to learn to lose, Marco," Adelia said, her voice sharp.

"Sorry, Sergio," I said, admitting my mistake, my voice low as a whisper of wind.

That gesture of sincerity struck a chord with my friend, who must have told his mother about it, because when I went to his house, Doña Adriana welcomed me warmly, her smile as warm as the afternoon sun.

"How wonderful you are, Marco!" she said, when I told her what I'd read about animals in the Salvat encyclopedia, her eyes bright with curiosity. "We have that one too; my husband Hernán gets the installments every week, since he works at Gasán. But neither Sergio nor Hortensio are good readers."

Doña Adriana had a flirtatious, charming smile, and always wore fitted pants and a low-cut silk blouse, but such was the innocence in which I lived my childhood that neither she nor I ever, during the nearly six years we enjoyed our friendship, made any obscene or provocative gesture. Walking home, I wondered why my friends had such a kind mother, so happy, so gentle and understanding, while mine was so strict, her reprimands following one after another, like the torture chambers of a carnival ride.

One afternoon my mother asked me to go with her to Doña Carmen's new shop; it stood right on the corner of Avenida 87, at a three-way intersection, and it was better stocked than Don Ernesto's. It also had a public telephone for emergency calls.

Adelia bought a generous amount of groceries and paid with a hundred-peso bill.

"We hope to see you around here often!" said Doña Carmen, a stern, ruddy-faced woman, the real-life

version of Doña Ramona, wife of Benitín, Eneas's friend, whose adventures were already my favorite reading every Sunday, when I devoured the comic strips of *El Tiempo*, *El Espectador*, and *Flanco Conservador*.

"I'd love to!" my mother said, showing her perfect teeth. "But it'll be little Marco who comes around here often. Marquitos! Say hello to Doña Carmen!"

I was a shy, fearful child at the time, so it took great effort to manage to say:

"Pleasure to meet you, Doña Carmen."

"Speak like a man!" my mother scolded me.

My jaw trembled, and Doña Carmen came to my defense.

"Isn't he a charming boy? He'll grow out of that shyness."

On the way home, my mother saw a stand of bamboo growing on the corner and asked me to cut her one of its branches. I gave it to her, she took it home, and propped it up behind her bedroom door. I thought then it must be an improvised weapon against possible intruders, given my father's absence, and Matías's mocking face returned to my mind like a threat.

My father then came back from his trip with lots of gifts: a ball for me, a doll for Gabriela, a necklace for Adelia. Dinner was a celebration, the smell of succulent air-dried beef filling the room, my parents' laughter easing the tension, the clink of cutlery instilling hope.

"The longer the mission…!" David explained to us, raising his glass, "the better the assignments! So we're going on vacation to the coast!"

My sister and I jumped for joy, dancing hand in hand.

Adelia hugged him happily, her laughter filling the kitchen, and I dared to put on the popular record playing everywhere that year—a song about how, no matter how many loves a woman might have known, none compared to the singer's own, and how, like a river's current, she always came back, in the end, to his arms.

Our happiness, however, didn't last long. My mother handed my father a full inventory of grievances over every one of my faults, including my dispute with Sergio, which I already believed resolved.

"He sneaks out of the house without permission!" Adelia grumbled, her voice sharp as a blade. "At school, in religion class, he dared to say he wanted to go to Hell!"

"What kind of nonsense is that?" my father shouted, indignant.

It was true, but I'd only said it to avoid lying. The teacher had asked us whether we already knew which of two places we'd be going to. Before our expectant eyes, two enormous posters had been lowered from the classroom walls: one of children smiling around God among the clouds, and another of adults burning in flames, pierced by demons' pitchforks.

"Who's going to Heaven?" the student teacher asked, her thick glasses gleaming.

We all raised our hands.

"Very good!" she said, pleased, her curls trembling in her hair. "And now, is there anyone among

you destined for the torments of this other place, the dark and terrible Hell, where demons will whip you with lashes day and night, burning in the fire without ever being able to die a second time?"

I raised my hand, weighed down, my heart heavy.

"Teacher Remedios says I'll go there," I said, my voice barely audible.

A gasp of surprise ran through the children in the room. The student teacher grabbed her ruler and struck my hand furiously, the pain like a bolt of lightning.

"Get out of class right now!" she shouted. "Go to the principal's office and repeat to the headmistress what you just told us!"

Teacher Remedios, now headmistress of the Normal, listened to me with indignation, her glasses reflecting the light like mirrors.

"I suppose we can't punish you for being honest," she said, in the end, her voice cold as rain at dawn.

The anecdote, however, had traveled from mouth to mouth until it reached my Aunt Eustaquia, and from there, the whole family, who took it as a source of mockery, a fresh humiliation for my mother.

"They've seen him lurking around the corner store," she concluded her tirade, her finger pointing at me as though I were a criminal, "hiding like someone who's stolen something!"

"On top of everything, a thief?" my father said, taking off his belt while my face crumbled into tears.

Adding a fresh torment, my mother opened the Bible, her spiritual companion during my father's continual absences. She raised the bamboo rod in the air and read before my terrified face a previously underlined passage:

Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell.

For years I questioned God over those lines that, in my house, had justified such cruelty. First I came to understand that Jesus had abolished any rule of the Old Testament not grounded in good intentions and love. Later, in the halls of Temple University's library, I understood they were not a free pass for anger, but the wisdom of a people speaking of discipline born of affection.

The ancient Hebrews called that corrective *mûsār*, a discipline that shapes rather than humiliates, and the term translated as "rod"—*shevet*, the same word appearing in both Proverbs 23:13–14 and Psalm 23:4—does not denote a whip, but a shepherd's staff: the instrument with which he corrects, guides, and protects his flock.

That is why the psalmist can say:

Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.

Proverbs prescribes that timely correction preserves one from ruin, and from that slow death which is losing oneself from within. My mother also read that Saint Paul had asked fathers not to exasperate their children, and, at Mass, heard Father Fito speak of the harm done to a devout soul by taking passages

literally, since, lacking theological training, and losing love and mercy as their guiding star, people could commit excesses, as happened to me in my childhood.

But our society was itself a scourge; neither the Jaramillos, nor my aunts, nor my neighbors, nor my grandmothers ever once spoke up in my favor; on the contrary, I often heard them praise those beatings, or repeat that phrase members of my generation still proudly post on social media today, longing for an era of punishment I hope will never again torment children of generations to come:

"What that boy needs is the whip!"

If only they had completed their Latin studies, and read the Church Fathers!

Saint John Chrysostom advised: correct, but not with fury; do not punish, but teach; not with blows, but with counsel; not with anger, but with tenderness. Saint Jerome recalled that it is not a matter of wounding the body, but of instructing the soul. Augustine added that correction without charity does not build up; only discipline born of love can heal. And Saint Thomas Aquinas, so measured, drew the line: correction must proceed according to right reason and charity, since any punishment without love degenerates into injustice.

From Socrates I learned that there is no true evil, only ignorance; my parents were not executioners, but citizens rigorously bound to the law, unable to question what their own parents had taught them, and their parents before them, learned from their grandparents. Both were victims of what Freud calls the discontent of civilization, that renunciation of happiness out of fear

of poverty, of social scorn. My sincere questions—the same kind that condemned Christ, the kind Molière's misanthrope longed for in mankind, the kind Nietzsche would later denounce in Socrates as a lack of civic decorum—were precisely what stirred the fury of my teachers at the Anexa. They couldn't answer my questions and observations, because they had learned that even asking them was itself an offense, and so they did what friends, educators, and relatives alike advised them to do.

My mother handed the Bible to my father and came toward me, gripping her new instrument of punishment. The bamboo whistled through the air, and I felt I was living one of the misunderstandings from *The Twilight Zone*: that of a boy who tries to help a group of people who die shortly after, and is accused of having killed them.

The IDEMA shop, with its stacked sacks of rice and beans, the smell of dry grain, and the record I had put on, were the silent witnesses to my desperate gestures; I clenched my hands, seeking some sudden rescue, dreaming those sacks were no longer merchandise, but spaceships from which an army of angel-elves would emerge to save me.

The rod fell on my arms, on my neck, on my cheeks, while the chorus of that song kept repeating, something about a river carrying you here, and here you'll go no further.

By the end of those beatings, the coolness of the floor tiles comforted me, and I would stay there for hours on end, until my anguish turned into an inner

vertigo. I grew withdrawn, my face fearful of every human being, my hands sweating constantly.

Every afternoon, after sweeping and mopping, I'd watch from my window the streets of El Diamante, where children played freely, their laughter floating like birds, and I felt I was losing something that would never come back. Because, from the viaduct, everything seemed to wither: the city, the fear, and that invisible thread still tying me to childhood.

A rebellious voice inside me cried out that it was unjust for me not to be with them, jumping around, running across the hillside, exploring the dusty, desolate paths of the La Iglesia stream's canyon. Beyond, I watched the cars gliding across the Viaduct, actors in a flow that never ended, and I wondered what would happen the day one of them stopped, rebelling against that metal current, to lean out the window and take in the landscape. Would it then see the boy watching from a window, in a house at the edge of the neighborhood, on the hillside?

Only the occasional passerby ever glanced toward the abyss.

But I had Christ, who would one day grant me justice, just as Father Fito once warned, one Sunday at Mass, to the whole city of Bucaramanga, while looking at me as though offering comfort:

"Whoever causes one of these little ones to stumble, it would be better for him to have a millstone hung around his neck and be thrown into the sea."

And I had the floor tile, with its coolness that dissolved my worries.

Because that mistreated child—I would come to understand fifty years later, caressed by the sea breeze on the Sucre coastal plain—had been one more victim of a humanity that, in the name of the independence of nations, tolerated misgovernment and violence in Colombia and beyond: millions of children and adolescents, abused, murdered, or driven to their deaths, amid a spurious peace among adults that allowed so many of their infanticides to go on lecturing about morality in universities and conferences.

And in my cabinet sat the *Vida Animal* encyclopedia, which my father collected for us in weekly installments. Those animals became, imperceptibly, my finest teachers; in their little drawings they endured their predators' attacks as an inevitable part of existence, and never once held a grudge against those who wished to devour them.

Neither the buffalo nor the deer hated the tiger for devouring its young.

And they died young, as I—believing it a comfort at the time—thought I too would. Unable to offer my mother, whom I loved most, any illusions about my future, I asked Christ to take me to rest in a world without scoldings, without misunderstandings, without belts.

And Christ, hearing my plea, listened to me, and, months later, carried me into His Kingdom, when I threw myself from my father's van, died, and knew the ecstasies of eternity.

But that is another story.

Chapter 6. From One Kingdom to Another

The school courtyard, in late October 1975, was a battlefield of scraped knees and fleeting alliances, where childhood's pecking order was settled with fists, taunts, and the occasional marble or bottle-cap competition. The air was thick with humidity rising off the concrete, mixed with the rich scent of ripe mangoes from the street vendor who set up shop by the school's iron gate, like Orpheus at the gates of Hades, singing his melodic, seductive call:

"Green or ripe mangoes, two cents each!"

The children's shouts mixed with the screech of tires on Carrera 27 and the buzz of cicadas from our prehistoric grove, Bucaramanga's lung. It was here, at the end of the school year, that Ovidio, the redhead with the lively, fox-like eyes, brought our old kindergarten gang back together. Once the terror of recess, we had drifted apart, softened by time and the occasional swat from our mothers' slippers. But Ovidio's call to arms came during a heated dispute over a *giant marble*, a gleaming sphere the size of a small plum, swirled with white and purple, whose value had been inflated by the boldness of its owner, Enriqueto, known to all as Kikito.

Kikito, with his golden curls and that charm that made the teachers sigh, argued with Nelson over the rules of a game of distance marbles.

The marble had rolled a hand's width past the chalk line on the ground, but Kikito insisted the measurement should be Nelson's palm span, not his own. Nelson, fed up with an argument that flouted the prevailing rules, grabbed the marble and walked off with a firm step, ignoring Kikito's protests. Kikito, without a second thought, unleashed a karate kick—a martial art unknown to us, playground plebeians, that sent Nelson sprawling to the ground, groaning, his hand clutching his shin. The circle of children around them held its breath, and it was then that Ovidio turned to me, that spark in his eyes that promised trouble.

"Marco, unleash the *whirlwind*!" he said, referring to my improvised boxing technique from kindergarten, a chaotic dance of spinning arms that, through pure centrifugal force, turned my fists into projectiles. I had sworn never to use it again after my mother's beatings, since she considered any fight a personal affront.

But Kikito, emboldened, challenged me with a martial pose, mimicking the photo Uncle Chico kept of Bruce Lee, body angled sideways, arms crossed. I hesitated to attack, feeling the weight of Ovidio's, Nelson's, and Héctor's eyes, watching expectantly from the side. The pressure was too much. With a shout that echoed across the courtyard, I lunged, my arms spinning like windmill blades. I dodged Kikito's kick, which whistled past my ear, and landed a direct punch to his temple that dropped him to the ground, his eyes

rolling back, his golden curls sprawled everywhere. The courtyard erupted in cheers. Nelson, Ovidio, and Héctor hoisted me onto their shoulders, as though I were a war hero, while the other children shouted my name. Even Orpheus, of the mangoes, leaning from the gate, let out a little laugh.

That triumph emboldened us. The gang, reborn under Ovidio's leadership, restored order at recess. The fourth- and fifth-grade boys, once treacherous giants who looked down on us, now learned to respect us. We were the *Three Musketeers* in a chaotic Paris, moving with a mix of daring, childish justice, and unshakable pride. Every recess was a chance to make things right for the downtrodden against the excesses of the older boys, and there was no shortage of feats that, so the girls in our class told us, made us legends.

One of our first feats was against Carlitos, a fifth-grade bully who strutted around with his new soccer ball, a gift from his father, a merchant who bragged about selling auto parts downtown. Carlitos made a habit of humiliating the smaller kids, taking their snacks and forcing them to kneel to get them back. Ovidio, with his leader's cunning, devised a plan. During recess, while Carlitos played with his ball in the center of the courtyard, Héctor approached, feigning interest in joining the game. Carlitos, trusting, passed him the ball, and at that moment Nelson and I sprang out from behind a tree, running like men possessed. Nelson gave him a shove that threw him off balance, and I, with a quick move, kicked the ball onto the school roof. Carlitos's scream was a righteous melody to our

ears, and while he ran off to complain to the teachers, we vanished into the crowd, laughing until our stomachs hurt. The ball stayed on the roof for days, until a rainstorm finally rolled it down into the courtyard, but by then Carlitos was no longer king of recess.

Another time, we faced off against the fourth-grade twins, two identical brothers who looked like they'd stepped out of a horror story, with their crooked smiles and their habit of spitting on anyone who passed too close. The twins had stolen a box of colored chalk from the art room and were spending their time drawing insults on the boys' bathroom walls. Ovidio, with his theatrical sense of vengeance, gathered us behind the school cafeteria. "Let's teach them a lesson," he said, pulling a handful of chalk from another classroom. That afternoon, while the twins were scribbling obscene doodles, we caught them by surprise. Héctor and Nelson held them down while I, with the solemnity of a judge, wrote on the wall: "The twins spit like convicts." Then we forced them to erase it all with their own shirts, under threat of taking them to Teacher Remedios. The twins, humiliated, never spat on another child again.

But not all our feats were so glorious. Once, overconfident, we decided to challenge a group of fifth graders playing spinning tops in a corner of the courtyard. They were experts, spinning their tops with waxed strings that snapped like whips. Ovidio, who never backed down from a challenge, wagered his favorite top, one of polished wood with a steel tip his

father had brought him from Bogotá. The group's leader, a skinny boy named Jairo, accepted the challenge with a mocking smile. The duel was a disaster: Jairo launched his top with such force that it shattered Ovidio's, leaving nothing but splinters. We withdrew in silence, Ovidio clenching his fists to hold back tears. That night, we swore revenge, but the school year ended before we could plan anything.

Our last great adventure was against a fourth-grade group who called themselves "The Hawks." They controlled the courtyard's only leafy tree, an enormous mango that offered shade and a perfect climbing spot. The Hawks charged a "toll" to any small child who wanted to climb: a candy, a coin, or, in the worst case, a punch if they didn't pay. Ovidio, who hated bullies as much as he hated authoritarian teachers, decided the tree would be ours. For a week, we planned the assault. Héctor, the tallest, would climb first to distract them. Nelson, with his gift for stealth, would steal their candy stash. And I, with my *whirlwind*, would handle any resistance. On the day of the attack, everything went as planned. Héctor scaled the tree like a monkey, shouting insults to draw out the Hawks. Nelson slipped through the lower branches and emptied their bags, dumping the candy onto the ground for the other kids to grab. When the Hawks' leader, a stout boy named Olimpo, tried to hit Héctor, I sprang into action. My *whirlwind* wasn't as epic as it had been against Kikito, but it was enough to bring Olimpo to his knees, gasping. The Hawks fled, and the tree was ours for the rest of the month. Every recess, we sat in the highest branches, eating stolen

mangoes and laughing while the other children watched us with a mix of respect and admiration.

We were invincible, or so we believed, until November arrived and final exams forced us to slow down. The courtyard grew calmer, and the student teachers, always eager to assert their authority, began compiling our exploits to present as serious offenses, even crimes, to their superiors. The gang, though still united, feared the end of the school year would bring change. And so it did.

Final grades were published in December, and to my surprise, I placed third among all three first-grade classes. I could have been first, but a three in calligraphy dragged down my overall average. Several parents protested, considering that my name usually appeared in the teachers' reports as a synonym for trouble.

No doubt to avoid household gossip among my classmates, not a single teacher congratulated me. The students who placed first, second, fourth, fifth, and sixth were called up to raise, respectively, the flags of Colombia, Santander, Bucaramanga, the Ministry of Education, and the Colombian and Bucaramanga Normal Schools for Young Ladies, in a solemn ceremony, with prizes, diplomas, applause, and kisses and smiles from the young ladies. I, on the other hand, was ignored. It didn't bother me too much; I preferred my friends' rough camaraderie to the flattery of teachers who no longer bothered hiding their animosity toward me.

My mother, Adelia, was summoned not by Teacher Remedios—as the previous year—but by

Eudalia García, my homeroom teacher. Eudalia was an arrogant septuagenarian, her hair dyed an improbable black, with a bearing that screamed authority. She collected two pensions, according to rumor, and still drew a third salary while barely showing up at school, leaving her class in the hands of sixth-year student teachers, inexperienced young women who made up for their lack of pedagogy with shouts and blows no parent questioned in those days.

"Your son placed third in grades," Eudalia said, seated behind her desk, her tone sounding more like an accusation than praise. "But I can't congratulate you, Señora Adelia. You already know what impressions we've had of Marco since last year."

"And he hasn't changed?" my mother asked, a mix of hope and exhaustion in her voice.

"He's been calmer," Eudalia conceded, with a smile so thin it never reached her eyes. "Which suggests you've followed our advice to correct him frequently. But this past month we've received complaints. He nearly knocked Kikito Pujana unconscious."

"To…?" My mother's mouth fell open, horrified.

"I know what you're thinking," Eudalia went on, raising a hand as though conducting an orchestra. "What's a Pujana doing at a modest school? Times have changed, señora. There are wealthy poor people now, and rich people who, as you know, have lost their fortunes and live with dignity, but modestly."

"What do you recommend?" my mother asked, her voice barely a whisper.

"That you keep correcting him with the rod, and, if necessary, with the cable," Eudalia snapped, without a shred of doubt. "He's unbearable. He asks the most obvious questions, objects to the clearest points, and spends the whole day smiling as though everything were a game. It's not just me saying this—the young ladies of the Normal say so too, and it's already written into the teachers' final report."

"He's a good student," my mother replied, for the first time raising her voice in my defense.

Eudalia nodded, pressing her lips together, unable to say "yes." My mother fell silent, thoughtful, and for a moment I felt she was on my side. She stood, shook Eudalia's hand coldly and, taking her purse, led me out of the room. I walked beside her, my chest puffed out, like a warrior who has survived a battle.

But all that fleeting glory from the courtyard would fade into the background when, in December, we set off on our trip to the coast. It wasn't my first time on a plane, since, according to my parents, I had flown several times in a small aircraft, when my father traveled on assignment to remote towns in Santander, like Capitanejo.

Reliving the scenario of *The Twilight Zone*, the one where a monster destroys a plane's engine, was an adventure that kept me on the edge of my seat, watching through the window as the clouds drifted by, calm as giant cotton balls. To my relief, it wasn't night, but day; there was no storm, only sun.

The flight from Bucaramanga to Barranquilla was a flood of emotions: the roar of the engines, the

slight tremor at takeoff, and that sensation of floating that made me imagine we were mechanical birds crossing the sky. We landed at Ernesto Cortissoz Airport, where the humid, salty air of the coast struck me like an invisible wave, announcing a new world, far from the arid mountains of Santander.

Sartorio, my father's uncle, was waiting for us: a man in an impeccable white linen suit, a Panama hat that gave him the air of an old-fashioned landowner, and a smile that hid decades of family resentments. Beside him stood Clotilde, his wife, a mixed-race woman with piercing green eyes, wide hips, and dark skin that shone under the Caribbean sun. She wore a blue silk dress that fluttered in the breeze, as though the sea itself had wrapped around her. She carried a bouquet of yellow roses, a symbol of admiration and friendship, though we would soon discover it was more decoration than sincere gesture. Three young people accompanied them, their children, dressed in the fashion of 1975: wide-collared shirts in vibrant shades of orange and green, bell-bottom trousers that flared out like bells, and belts with large, gleaming buckles that caught the sun like cheap jewelry.

Collecting my luggage, I imitated a girl I'd seen on television and hopped onto a suitcase, rolling across the airport's polished floor like a race car. My mother, with a quick pinch to my arm that burned like fire, yanked me off.

"Behave, Marco!" she hissed, gripping my arm tightly, her eyes throwing sparks. "You're not going to

ruin our vacation with a broken bone in front of this whole crowd!"

I wailed, more from shame than pain, and only stopped moaning when the curious—and somewhat disapproving—glances of the other travelers made her loosen her grip. Leaving the airport, the heat wrapped around us like a damp blanket, and Barranquilla's bustle welcomed us: black and dark-blue taxis honking, street vendors selling arepas and mango juice, and the distant murmur of the sea, which seemed to beat like a giant heart.

My father, David, approached Sartorio with a forced smile, extending his hand.

"Hello, Uncle!" he said, his voice trying to sound casual.

Sartorio looked at him, confused, his eyes searching for someone else among the crowd of passengers dragging their luggage.

"You must have me confused with someone," he answered, glancing over my father's shoulder, as though expecting a ghost.

"Who are you looking for, sir?" Clotilde asked, with a cutting tone that clashed with her elegant bearing, clutching the bouquet of roses to her chest.

"I'm David! David Saint-André!" my father insisted, his smile persisting, though I noticed his shoulders tense.

"But David is sixty-four!" one of the young men cut in, a male copy of Clotilde, with the same shrewd look and an incipient moustache trying to make him look older.

"You're…!" Sartorio's eyes went wide, bewildered, as the truth struck him like a cold wave.

"I think they mistook you for your uncle, David," my mother said, pulling my sister and me against her legs, her voice a whisper laced with irony.

There was a tense pause, the air thick with the taste of salt and gasoline. My father waited for an invitation, an apology, something to save the situation. But Clotilde, with a look of disdain that rang out like distant thunder, murmured something to her husband. Her final words, spoken loudly enough for us to hear, landed like a whip crack:

"You are not going to put up the son of a freeloader! We're leaving now, Sartorio!"

Sartorio, embarrassed, muttered something inaudible as his family walked off, leaving behind a trail of expensive perfume and remorse. My father sighed, resigned. It was clear he had tried to deceive his uncle, signing the telegram as though he were his older namesake, knowing his relationship with my grandfather—a man who had squandered his life on parties and bad decisions—wasn't the best. And if my aunts had left three farms to my grandfather, Sartorio had received only crumbs from them: used clothing, empty promises, and a resentment that fermented like old wine.

"Never mind," my father said, summoning his best mood. "We'll stay at the finest hotel in Barranquilla! Come on, the coast awaits."

We took a taxi, a gleaming emerald-green Chevrolet that smelled of sand and sea salt, and headed

to the Hotel del Prado, an icon of the city with its colonial architecture and lush gardens. We planned to stay two days, but the coast's magic caught us, stretching our stay to five.

My sister Gabriela and I became the undisputed kings of the hotel, doted on by the chambermaids—young women with warm smiles and white uniforms that rustled as they moved—who hugged me enthusiastically, pressing me against their generous chests, in an era when no one saw any malice in such gestures.

We had breakfasts of crispy bacon that crackled in the mouth, pancakes soaked in golden honey, and exotic fruit juices bursting with flavors unknown to a boy from the mountains. At night, we swam in the lit-up pool, the cool water contrasting with the sticky heat, while the stars flickered like fireflies in the black sky.

But the true exploration of coastal life began on the beaches near Barranquilla, like Puerto Colombia or Pradomar, where the Caribbean stretched out like an infinite blue tapestry, dotted with white foam. The sun burned our skin, but the salty wind eased it, carrying with it the cry of seagulls and the constant murmur of the waves. Street vendors walked the sand with carts loaded with fresh coconuts, their sweet water a balm against thirst; shrimp empanadas that crackled when bitten, leaving a taste of oil and sea; and green mango ice cream that melted in the mouth with a delicious tartness. I watched, fascinated, as local fishermen, their skin weathered by the sun, their nets patched and mended, returned at dusk in their wooden boats,

unloading baskets brimming with red snapper and lobsters waving their red claws. One of them, an older man with a white moustache and a battered straw hat, let me help untangle a net, laughing a hoarse laugh when a crab pinched my finger.

"The coast teaches with a kick, kid!" he said, winking at me.

Life in "La Arenosa" had a different rhythm, a relaxed pulse that contrasted with Bucaramanga's rigidity. Here, people walked slowly, chatting on corners with bottles of cold beer in hand, while vallenato music poured from portable radios, filling the air with accordion chords and lyrics of lost loves. On the streets of Barranquilla, the bustle was constant: mototaxis zigzagging between cars, women with baskets of fruit on their heads selling mangoes and guavas, barefoot children playing soccer with improvised rag balls. One afternoon, we joined a group of locals on a nearby beach, where a pickup game turned into an epic battle.

My father, shirt unbuttoned, pants rolled up, scored a goal we celebrated with hugs and laughter, while the sun set, tinting the sea orange and purple. But not everything was idyllic; dark humor crept into the stories the fishermen told around a bonfire: of storms that swallowed whole boats, of sharks lurking in the depths, of naïve tourists who lost everything in foolish bets.

"The coast gives, and the coast takes, son," one of them said, with a crooked smile, as we grilled a fresh fish that dripped juice onto the coals.

After five days we took an air-conditioned bus—with new vinyl seats and loud stereo music—to Santa Marta, the pearl of the Caribbean, to visit Osmán, a friend of my father's from his teenage years. The trip was an odyssey: winding curves along the coast, views of cliffs dropping into the sea, and improvised stops where vendors climbed aboard with bags of pork rinds and bottles of cold water. Osmán had been the last assistant at the Saint-André auto parts store in Bucaramanga, before the business collapsed after my grandfather's death. He welcomed us into a modern house a hundred meters from a white-sand beach, with an immaculate lawn bordered by daisies, gladiolas, and petunias that perfumed the air with tropical sweetness. The sea breeze drifted in through the open windows, carrying the constant sound of waves breaking on the shore.

"Those were the days!" Osmán told my father, as he showed us a spacious bedroom overlooking the sea, its curtains billowing like sails.

Osmán's house was a testament to coastal prosperity: light wood furniture, ceiling fans turning lazily, and a backyard with hammocks strung between palm trees whispering in the wind. Here, life flowed with an enviable ease. Osmán, in his floral shirt and Bermuda shorts, embodied the coastal spirit: relaxed, hospitable, always ready with a story to tell.

"On the coast, time doesn't run, it dances," he joked, serving us fresh lulo juice.

"Do you play *telebolito*?" his four-year-old son Germán asked me, with that instant warmth only people

from the coast know how to offer, as though we'd been lifelong friends.

"You have a *telebolito*?" I answered, surprised.

The game, the Hispanic version of Atari's *Pong*, was the sensation of that Christmas, a black rectangle with white paddles bouncing a ball across a flickering screen. Two players, each with a controller wired to a console, moved a small electronic line to keep the ball, bouncing from side to side, from slipping past the screen's edge, until whoever let it pass lost a point.

"I'll teach you!" Germán said, leading me to a new television, a sleek 1975 design with chrome edges and a sharp picture that looked like it came from the future.

As we played, the game's electronic beeping mixed with laughter and the murmur of the sea. My mother chatted with Fátima, Osmán's wife, a slender blonde woman with a mischievous, unruly smile, who wore swimsuits covered by colorful sarongs that accentuated her figure. Fátima was the embodiment of coastal vitality: she told racy jokes with a wink, while preparing shrimp ceviche that stung the tongue like a fiery kiss. Her daughter, Andrea, a year younger than me, joined us, hugging me with a childish flirtatiousness that left me blushing.

"You're cute!" she said, her green eyes shining like the sea under the midday sun.

"So are you!" I answered, fascinated by her waving blonde hair and tanned skin.

"You lost!" Germán shouted, annoyed by our interruption, turning off the television with a dramatic gesture.

"Play with me!" my sister Gabriela cut in, with a shyness that made Germán smile; he took her hand and led her out into the garden.

That night, under a starry sky that looked like a blanket of diamonds, I led Andrea to the darkest corner of the garden, where the palm trees whispered secrets. Without a word, we pressed our lips together in a clumsy kiss, imitating the romantic scenes from the movies we saw back in Bucaramanga. We didn't know how to kiss, but childish instinct guided us, and the salty taste of her lips mixed with the scent of the night-blooming flowers. It was a moment of pure innocence, interrupted only by the adults calling us in for dinner.

Those days in Santa Marta were an avalanche of games, beach trips, and furtive kisses. The beach was a living paradise: white sand that burned our feet, turquoise waters where we swam until our skin wrinkled, and vendors with seashells and shell necklaces that jingled like music. One afternoon, we explored the local market, a labyrinth of stalls where the smell of fresh fish mixed with spices and ripe fruit. Osmán took us to try local dishes: rice with creamy, sweet coconut, crispy patacones flattened with a bottle, and fish sancocho bubbling in enormous pots over wood fires.

"The coast strengthens the body and the soul," Osmán said, as we shared stories around the table. "Though you already come from an untamable stock.

Has your father already told you about his brawl with one-eyed Artajerjes?"

I looked at my father, who smiled indulgently at the murmur of the waves.

"Your father was taking inventory at *Mecanópolis* when the store's phone, mounted on the back wall, started ringing at seven at night. We usually didn't answer after six, but the ringing was so insistent that your father picked up the receiver. It was your grandmother Elvia, who, sobbing, told him one-eyed Artajerjes had tried to kiss her, and that she had run off and locked herself in her room. But the one-eyed man was threatening to break the door down if she didn't let him in. Yes, just as you're hearing it!

"Elvia was barely thirty-five at the time, and plenty of men courted her. Why wouldn't they, being heir to a store and a clothing factory, plus two cars, a van, and a mansion in the San Alonso neighborhood? But Elvia was a diligent matron who, following Aunt Tita's example, knew she had to stay away from the altar for the love of her twelve children. It was enough for her to reject her suitors, who, one way or another, accepted her dilemma.

"But Artajerjes was a Don Juan who didn't take no for an answer. On the contrary—as is typical of seducers—he took it as a challenge to be broken by force, forcing women, especially the fiercest ones, to kiss him until, as he put it, he'd 'tamed' them. It was during one of those passionate outbursts that a lady gouged out his right eye, leaving him with a patch he wore with pride, like Blas de Lezo: unmistakable proof,

according to him, of his jousts in the domains of Aphrodite.

"So your father, without even waiting for morning, asked me to come with him, and we drove out to your grandmother's house, where the one-eyed man was already throwing himself against her bedroom door. David then challenged him to hit him instead, if he was so brave; and Artajerjes, accepting the challenge, threw a lamp at him. Your aunts, uncles, and I then watched David knock the one-eyed man out cold, who ended up begging for mercy."

We children applauded the happy ending of that story.

"And that damned man never came back," my father nodded, pleased, pouring himself a glass of Cuban rum.

The greatest thrill was visiting a games and trampoline arcade in Rodadero, a spacious venue with every kind of cutting-edge electronic game, arranged around electrified tables that glowed like metallic discs pulsing with neon light. Paying for fifteen-minute turns, we bounced on trampolines, doing flips in the air, laughing until our stomachs hurt. The place buzzed with energy: children shouting, machines beeping, and the smell of cotton candy floating in the humid air. Once, I tried a triple flip and landed on my back, the impact knocking the wind out of me, but dark humor saved me: "At least my head didn't fall off like the kid who stuck his head out of his parents' car without checking what car was coming from behind!" I thought, alluding to the urban legend my mother used to correct us with

whenever we leaned out the window, laughing as I got up.

One afternoon, while my father and Osmán drank beers in hammocks facing the sea, the sun tinting the horizon pink and orange, Osmán reminisced about the past.

"To think we could have made that store thrive together, David," he said, staring at the horizon where the sea melted into the sky.

The *Mecanópolis* auto parts store, belonging to the Saint-André family, had fallen victim to negligence and partying.

After my grandfather's death, my father took over management, but his brother Terencio also "went to work": he'd help a customer, empty the cash register, and take the light-blue 1960 Ford truck out to party. With his friends, they'd drive all the way to Piedecuesta, where they bought barrels of illegal aguardiente that kept them drunk until dawn.

My father, desperate, rented trucks to keep the business afloat, until one Sunday morning he was woken with the news that Uncle Terencio had crashed the *Mecanópolis* truck into the front of a brothel.

Papá complained to my grandmother Elvia, who, instead of sympathizing, lectured him for caring more about material goods than his brother's state of mind.

"He's depressed!" she told him. "He's fallen in love with a woman who turned out to be—nobody had told him—of loose morals! And where were you, his older brother? That's what my friends ask me!"

When my father tried to explain the loss that vehicle represented—all the more so upon learning it had no insurance, since Terencio had taken the premium payment and spent it without a word, lying that he'd already paid it—my grandmother replied that assets ought to be split among all the siblings, and that the truck belonged to Terencio, since my father had already received plenty of gifts from Tita.

The argument escalated.

"At this rate, the business is going to go under!" my father shouted, his voice trembling with frustration.

"That's not my responsibility!" Elvia replied, her eyes blazing. "Besides, I have a textile shop with two hundred sewing machines, all brand new. You'll just have to work with little Terencio, supporting him through his teenage ups and downs!"

Fed up, my father packed his bags and returned to Charalá, to work as foreman on the farm of his great-uncle Heriberto, the strongest man in Charalá, famous for having wrestled down a bull with his bare arms at the town fair. For nearly two years he led a peaceful, bucolic life, exchanging letters with Osmán, who wrote to him about *Mecanópolis*'s increasingly dire state. His indignation grew when he read that the company was about to be seized by the banks, and that Uncle Terencio, instead of confronting the crisis, had sold off the remaining stock of engines at rock-bottom prices to pay for his enrollment at the national army's cadet school.

Convinced that his uncle Roberto's calm ranching life wasn't for him, my father sought out

another of his uncles, Congressman David Saint-André, who offered him a position at the Agustín Codazzi Institute. It was right then that my father received a telegram from my grandmother Elvia, begging him to come back and take the reins of the failing business.

Papá went back to Bucaramanga to say goodbye to Osmán, and to recommend him to my grandmother as the new manager of *Mecanópolis* auto parts, explaining that his decision was already made. Elvia pressed him, but my father dismissed her with a cold bow, like a son who doesn't wish to wound her but can no longer bear the weight of the family.

"Your blessing, Mother," he said, kissing her hand, though his eyes said goodbye forever.

A year later, Osmán ran into my father on the streets of Bucaramanga.

"The store's going to close," he said, disappointed, hands in his pockets. "I'm heading to the coast with whatever severance I get."

"I have no doubt you'll do well there," my father answered, patting his shoulder. "You're honest and young, and smart too."

On the coast, Osmán worked for Don Mohamed, a Lebanese man who had converted to Christianity to marry Joaquina, an accountant from Armenia, in the coffee region. They valued his punctuality and diligence, but above all his honesty and loyalty, in a place where excuses for missing work were as common as the waves.

"These coastal folk calculate how to miss one day a week," Don Mohamed used to grumble, his

accent thick. "They always come up with excuses, and they buy medical certificates from doctors for whatever coin they've got."

His work extended to Don Mohamed's home, who began inviting him to weekly gatherings, where food was abundant: trays of chicken and rice, fried yucas, fruit salads. It was there that he fell in love with his daughter, Fátima, who danced vallenato as though the rhythm ran in her blood.

Our farewell was sad, by the warmth of a beach bonfire, sparks rising into the sky like shooting stars. A growing anguish gripped me then, thinking I'd have to go back to the Normal school, to my teachers' scorn, their resentful looks, the fights at recess, my father's beatings. The sea, with its eternal ebb and flow, seemed to mock my melancholy, reminding me that coastal life was fleeting for a visitor like me.

My father's revenge for the airport humiliation came on December 31st, when Barranquilla's high society celebrated New Year's Eve, San Silvestre night, with Lucho Bermúdez's orchestra set up over the Hotel del Prado's pool. The air vibrated with clarinets and drums, and we guests had preferred tables, decorated with white tablecloths and crystal glasses. My sister pointed at my uncle Sartorio and his wife Clotilde, packed in with other locals who'd paid for tickets to get in, behind the velvet rope separating the exclusive orchestra area and the guest tables.

"They must have a table in the restaurant," my mother said, with a vengeful smile, sipping her

champagne, "a hundred meters from here, eating off the regular menu."

My father, a mischievous glint in his eye, called over a uniformed waiter and told him clearly, making sure it carried over the music:

"Tell that gentleman by the third post that he's welcome to join us at our table. We'll be having lobster gratin and champagne, and we'd be happy to invite him and his family."

The waiter walked off, weaving through the dancing crowd, and delivered the message into Sartorio's ear. He smiled, somewhat forced, and waved at us, which my father returned with the coldness of Michael Corleone in *The Godfather Part II*, a faint nod that said "I've got you now." But then Clotilde stepped in, her face indignant and red as a ripe tomato, pulling her husband by the arm and leading him away from us, muttering curses the wind carried off.

I wouldn't hear from them again until 1994, when, by then unable to remember who they were, I lived through a similar episode with him and his wife in New York, where fate, with its cruel irony, repeated the scene in an upscale restaurant.

Back in Bucaramanga, January brought a series of games with Sergio and Hortensio, firing plastic Toico machine guns that launched plastic "grenades." My Christmas gift, a "Devil Car" advertised as one that could jump over barrels and fire, was a total flop. Bought as a bargain, it never worked despite our best efforts: changing the batteries, cleaning the circuits with a rag, even praying to Saint Jude. Only years later did I

learn my father had bought it at a store brazenly selling defective goods at half price, a cruel joke of seventies commerce.

The new school year began with the news that the Three Musketeers group, as we'd already been nicknamed, had been dissolved. Héctor and Nelson went to second grade A, I to B, and Ovidio to C.

"I can't believe you passed the year!" Eugenia exclaimed on seeing me, as we drank water from the taps set against a tiled wall.

"Why not?" I asked, puzzled. "I placed third out of every first-grade class."

"But you didn't raise the flag," she scoffed, with a look of contempt.

At recess I ran into Ovidio and told him we should ask to be switched back into the same class. He told me his parents had forbidden him from being friends with me. He tried to walk away, and I stopped him, my eyes tearing up. He then asked me if I was a girl. I exploded with fury and challenged him to a fight. This time he wasn't afraid, as before, to face me, and he took up a stance unfamiliar to me. I attacked, and he landed a precise blow to my cheek that knocked me to the ground.

"It's called boxing!" he shouted at me, pointing his finger. "And I learned it so no one could ever tell me what to do again!"

Our friendship broken, I went back to the classroom. Once again, the nightmare of calligraphy. I worked on my page while the other children shouted and jumped around, emboldened by the teacher's

absence. One of them in particular, dark-skinned, short, with big buck teeth—Eliseo, son of an acquaintance of my father's named Cardona—ran down the aisle beside me, shouting over and over. The headache I felt was unbearable and kept me from concentrating.

"Here he comes!" he shouted with a howl, and came running back down the aisle again. This time, seized by sudden anger, I stuck out my leg.

Eliseo, focused on reaching his desk in the front row, reserved for the shortest students, didn't see my leg, whose only intention had been to startle him, and crashed, falling flat on his face, his face hitting the tile, breaking his front baby tooth. His crying started immediately, right as the teacher walked in.

"What happened?"

"Marco tripped him," Eugenia pointed at me, speaking for the first time in public of her own accord.

All the other children pointed their fingers at me too. I wanted to say the fault was Eliseo's, for not respecting those of us working diligently in class, that running and shouting when the teachers weren't there wasn't allowed, but that scene was already in the past. What mattered now was my guilt in tripping an innocent boy who "wasn't doing anything to me."

"This month his conduct grade is going to be a four out of five," was the sentence handed down by my new homeroom teacher, Débora, her wide hair lacquered, excessive eyeshadow on her lids, a blouse with thick pink-and-white terlenka lapels, and shiny costume necklaces resting on her chest.

Eliseo was left toothless, at a time when cosmetic dentistry didn't yet exist; his consolation was that it was a baby tooth, one that would eventually give way to his adult teeth. My poor conduct grade wouldn't be his only compensation. It was he who would report me a month later, when, playing hide-and-seek at recess and trying to avoid being caught in one of the bathroom stalls, I jumped into the neighboring one, dangerously scaling the wall dividing them, and, not accounting for my growing weight, threw myself onto the toilet tank next door. My foot gave way against the cracked porcelain and I ended up wedged into the tank, my leg wet up to the thigh. I got out right away, but the rumor spread quickly through the whole school.

So, in a scene prepared in advance, while I was in class, Headmistress Remedios walked in, her face furious, and said:

"I've been told that the vandal who, playing hide-and-seek with other children, took hold of one of the men's bathroom toilets at recess today and broke it in two, is in this class. Who is such an antisocial child?"

Eliseo immediately stood up from his seat.

"It was Marco Saint-André!"

"He is expelled from this school, effective immediately! I'm calling his parents right now to come get him. I consider one more minute of you in these classrooms a danger to our safety, and everyone else's."

A gasp of surprise rose from all my classmates, who looked at me as though I'd committed the gravest crime those halls could ever witness in their long history.

I sat down, defeated, but this time I didn't cry. Why should I have? I hadn't done anything wrong. I was only playing.

Papá arrived half an hour later and heard the same litany in Remedios's office.

"So the problem is he broke a toilet? If it's about the cost, I'll pay for it. That way you can replace it, since, frankly, they're already quite old."

"He's maladjusted!"

"But you just told me yourself he was playing hide-and-seek. He must have been very creative, jumping from one toilet to the next."

"That's exactly what happened!" I nodded immediately, breaking my silence.

Remedios shrugged.

"Either way, it's already decided. Nothing and no one will change my mind that Marco is a child who's going to be a problem for his family and for Bucaramanga society."

"And the solution is to expel him?"

"He has a zero in conduct and discipline this term."

"But," David protested, "you know full well no other school will accept him with that grade!"

"That's not my problem, Mr. Saint-André!"

My father smiled disdainfully, said nothing more, and led me out of the school.

I never set foot in those classrooms again for nineteen years, until, the strange turns life takes!, organizing a theater season of my own plays in

Bucaramanga, I was invited by students of the Anexa to present our version of Ionesco's *The Lesson*.

I, playing the Professor, greeted the teachers who had expelled me so ignominiously two decades earlier. None of them recognized me, not even Remedios, now white-haired.

That performance, before two thousand spectators, drew laughter and applause from children and teenagers, and a scream of terror when I, correcting again and again the student unable to pronounce the word "knife," even though she pronounces it correctly, end up stabbing her, murdering her, insulting her as a social blight, a detestable cockroach to be crushed.

At the end, a graveside silence fell over the auditorium. We heard the sobbing of one, of two, of twenty, of a hundred young women, who recognized in that play the practices still prevailing in their own education, though under a more refined or masked violence, equally arbitrary and authoritarian.

Teacher Remedios then climbed onto the stage, thanked me, and, turning to the audience, said, in that authoritarian voice she had always wielded:

"Young ladies!"

But this time there was no silence, only laughter. Her face flushed, and she, hiding her shock, began laughing too, upon realizing the Professor of *The Lesson* was her own reflection. It was then that I took the microphone and said:

"Thank you for your invitation. I just want to mention that I too was a student at this institution, nineteen years ago."

"And why did you leave?" Remedios asked, still not recognizing me.

"Because you expelled me."

A gasp burst out among the spectators. Remedios recognized me and, hardening her expression, walked away, stumbling, though never losing her balance, her legs giving way beneath her.

"But it was so that you could become the person you are today," the discipline prefect interjected.

"No doubt!" I said, taking pity on the ordeal not I, but fate itself, had put her through.

A student then came up and took the microphone.

"We thank you, Master Saint-André, for such a magnificent work, a clear message from France and Romania about the problems in our own education. We will work, from now on, to rely more on consensus, and less on authority, following the new theories of education."

There was applause and a farewell reception Teacher Remedios could not join us for. The last time I saw her was in the chapel of the Sagrario, at the Church of the Sacred Heart in Bucaramanga. I wanted to greet her, but every time I approached, she changed course, or ignored me. There I saw her praying for long hours, tears in her eyes.

A friend of mine, a relative of hers, once asked her why she had corrected me so harshly, and her answer was as clear, as valid, as unbearably true and reasonable as it had been all those years before:

"Marco, like every child, had to be educated."

Chapter 7. A Boy with a Two in Conduct

Leaving La Normal school with my father, the noon sun fell like a slab over the grassy, black-earth courtyard, raising a humidity that clung to skin and clothes alike. I gripped his hand, confused and frightened, silently pleading for relief. I had just been expelled, and the world seemed to have stopped in that instant.

I looked up at the leafy treetops and remembered the stormy afternoon I had enjoyed among them over a year before, on my last day of kindergarten, before the meeting with our mothers, when, through a series of providential coincidences, I had been left behind by my teacher and classmates in the long corridor connecting the Young Ladies' School with the Anexa, an area flanked by green lawns and giant trees offering welcoming shade, the coolest spot in the school, generally off-limits to students of both institutions.

That epiphany occurred when the entire elementary school was taken to the Normal's auditorium to hear an education specialist. Teacher Remedios, who had already gathered enough complaints to draft her negative end-of-year report on me, kept me beside her in the front row, questioning me about what I disliked at school with a severity that struck me, at the time, as friendly.

"Recess is too short," I said, "and the teachers leave us alone a lot."

While she wrote down my complaints in her notebook, I watched, growing anxious, as, one by one, my classmates slipped out through the back door, guided by the porter, to form a line and return to the Anexa. By the time Teacher Remedios noticed the time and gave me permission to leave, the last group had just closed the latch on the gate at the far end of the long, uncovered hallway.

I was left completely alone. Suddenly, I heard a chorus of birds fluttering across the sky, and a rain of leaves and flowers covered me like snowflakes. I quickened my pace to catch up with my group, when a gust of cool wind stopped me, embracing me with a force that made me laugh, while the sun shone through the leafy treetops, above heavy grey clouds, spinning an improvised rainbow into being.

The leaves in the treetops leaned toward me from above with a tremendous force that, far from frightening me, exalted me, to the point that, keeping time with the crackle of their leaves, I sang a little refrain Teacher Teresa had taught us that very morning in class—a traditional children's rhyme calling for rain, for the Virgin of the Cave, for the little birds to sing and the clouds to rise.

I realized that what I was living through was a trifle compared to that revelation, which told me I was a prince, venerated by all of creation, there represented by hundreds of subjects of the silent vegetable kingdom, with Aeolus, god of the winds, as my aide-de-camp.

Such was the force of the wind that it lifted me an inch or two off the ground, and I felt an ecstasy I would only recognize again with intercourse in my adolescence.

That is why, when I learned that an engineer-mayor had decided to cut down those very trees to save money on the tunnel the citizenry demanded to protect those giants, I wrote a poem that was shared across social media and earned me his animosity, and that of the bureaucrats at his Institute of Culture, in 2022—a poem lamenting the felling of those ancient trees of my childhood, my sheltering grandfathers and patriarchs, and closing with that same childhood refrain calling the rain down once more.

A tear rolled down my cheek at the thought that I would never again see those towering trees, my silent friends. But then, as though fate wished to distract me from my own misfortune, I saw a black Mercedes-Benz, gleaming under the sun, come through the main gate of the Escuela Anexa. It arrived escorted by two police motorcycles, something unusual not only at that modest public school, but in all of Bucaramanga. The engines roared with authority, and dust swirled around the wheels like a veil of mystery.

My father stopped for a moment, frowning beneath his hat.

"What's a car like that doing here?" he murmured, more to himself than to me.

I, at seven years old, could only imagine it was some president, or a millionaire lost in the wrong neighborhood. Years later, when the loose pieces of that plot came together in my mind like a forgotten

puzzle, I understood that vehicle wasn't only a symbol of power, but the beginning of a chain of events that shook all of Santander: a case of infanticide mixing politics, revenge, and the dark secrets of a family like my own.

It was long after those events that I was able to reconstruct what happened in that office, based on rumors, half-whispered confessions, and documents time had not entirely erased. The Mercedes stopped with a soft screech, and out stepped Ricardo Durán Rubio, Colombia's Minister of Education in March 1976. He was a man of medium height, dark complexion, with a calm but firm gaze, used to imposing himself without raising his voice. He wore a light linen suit, suited to Bucaramanga's generous heat, with a white shirt of light cotton and a wine-colored tie loosened at the collar from the midday humidity. His Panama hat cast a precise shadow over his face, where sweat mixed with the dignity of his office. Getting out, he instinctively smoothed his lapels and advanced with a confident step across the cobblestones and the expectant gaze of those present. Beside him came ministry staff, all carrying folders under their arms with expressions of bureaucratic efficiency. They had come to oversee the implementation of the López Michelsen government's Development Plan, "Closing the Gap," which sought to reduce social inequalities, especially in education.

Teacher Remedios, with her usual air of exaggerated authority, came out to receive him. Her

cotton dress printed with yellow magnolias seemed out of place beside the minister's elegance.

"We expected you tomorrow," was her greeting, in a tone mixing surprise and reproach.

"We moved up our trip," Durán Rubio apologized, in his soft but unshakable Huila accent. "I hope I'm not intruding."

Remedios wanted to explain that they had just expelled a renegade—me, of course—but feared an inquiry might expose her policies as contrary to that Liberal government's, or even, as was rumored in the hallways, Communist. Instead, she simply smiled.

"No!" she exclaimed, perhaps with too much enthusiasm.

"Might we speak somewhere?" the minister said, impatient, looking around the courtyard, where children ran, oblivious to the visit.

Remedios snapped out of her stupor and smiled sweetly.

"It would be my pleasure to lead you to my office," she said, extending her hand in a gesture meant to be elegant.

Durán Rubio turned toward his companions.

"Allow me to introduce my secretary, Miss Paulina," he said, extending a hand toward a red-haired young woman with lively, attentive green eyes, wearing a cream-colored linen outfit, light and elegant, ideal for Bucaramanga's heat. Her hair was pulled back with a green satin ribbon, and her brief smile hinted at both courtesy and curiosity. Then the minister gestured toward the man accompanying her.

"And this is our assistant, Humberto Bustamante."

Humberto was tall, thin, and hollow-eyed, seeming weighed down by a silence that wasn't entirely his own. He wore an olive-green linen suit, freshly bought, still holding the tailor's crease, a wide pink tie with purple checks, and the scent of new fabric. His light shirt, open at the collar, revealed skin marked by the sun, and by days counted without a calendar. His brown shoes, carefully polished, contrasted with the reddish earth of the courtyard. On his wrists lingered the faint trace of an uneven tan, and in his eyes, a mix of gratitude and pride, like someone who still can't quite believe he walks free.

Teacher Remedios watched them with a silent respect as they sat down in her air-conditioned office's modest sitting area: three wicker chairs, a slow fan, and a yellowed portrait of President López Michelsen hanging over the filing cabinet. Outside, the murmur of children at recess mixed with the buzz of cicadas. Durán Rubio, oblivious to the invisible tensions floating in the air, got straight to the point.

"We want to offer our most academically outstanding children the same wellbeing enjoyed by children from Colombia's wealthier classes," he said, his voice grave, accustomed to solemnity. "So my two associates will remain in Bucaramanga organizing what we're calling the Celebration of the Best: a day when three hundred children from twenty public schools across the city—those who have achieved the top three academic ranks in each grade, from first through fifth—

will share, for three days, the facilities of the Club del Cañón Hotel."

The air seemed to thicken between the words. Remedios nodded faintly, saying nothing, as though the syllables weighed more than that midday heat.

"And us?" she finally asked, fearing exclusion.

"Each school will send one teacher, responsible for the fifteen students from her institution," the minister explained, with a look that seemed to hold both the nobility of the project and its bureaucratic weight.

Teacher Débora, who had been listening from the doorway, arms crossed over her chest, then spoke up. She was a woman with angular features and dark eyes, marked by years of discipline and suspicion.

"And who guarantees their safety, Minister? Three hundred children is no small matter. They'll need transport, food, supervision. Not all of them know how to behave outside their own neighborhood."

Durán Rubio nodded patiently, like someone anticipating objections.

"There will be buses contracted by the Ministry, accompanied by education inspectors and medical staff. The children will be picked up on the morning of the first day in front of each school, and returned the same way on the third."

He turned to Humberto Bustamante.

"He'll be in charge of coordinating the logistics: transport, schedules, lodging, roll calls."

Humberto, who had remained silent until then, straightened with a slight stiffness.

"We've already contacted the Gómez y Cía transport company, which has buses in good condition," he said, his voice grave. "Routes will be organized by sector, to avoid delays. At the Club del Cañón, the children will sleep in rooms separated by age and sex, with a responsible teacher in each group."

He paused briefly and added, looking at Débora with a hint of contained respect.

"Meals will be handled by the hotel kitchen; three meals a day and snacks, reviewed by a nutritionist from the ICBF."

Débora eyed him with suspicion. There was something about that hollow-eyed assistant—his restrained gaze, the stiffness with which he held his shoulders—that made her uneasy.

"And security?" she asked, not hiding her sharp tone. "Who's making sure there's no trouble? You know how boys are when they gather in groups."

The minister stepped in, courteous but firm.

"There will be two shifts of security, made up of community police officers, in addition to the teachers. Humberto will oversee the rosters and access points."

Remedios, who had been watching the scene with her hands clasped, ventured to speak.

"And the activities, Minister? What will the children do for those three days?"

Miss Paulina, silent until then, leaned forward slightly.

"There will be reading and watercolor workshops, and cooperative games, plus a guided excursion to Lagos del Cacique park and a cultural

evening. We want them to feel recognized, not just evaluated."

Her voice was soft but confident, and for a moment the air in the office seemed lighter.

"A cultural evening," Débora repeated, skeptical. "And who keeps them quiet at bedtime?"

Durán Rubio smiled, with that diplomat's gesture he'd learned in the ministry's hallways.

"Teacher, if we manage to have them stay up late from happiness, and not from hunger, we'll already have accomplished something important."

The fan turned slowly, stirring the haze the sun drew up from the wet earth. Outside, the children's shouts in the courtyard reminded them of what was at stake.

Remedios stood, offering her hand to the minister.

"Very well," she said. "Count on us. Let the children of Bucaramanga remember that they too can be among the best."

Four women in charge of the kitchen then came in with a feast of freshly fried empanadas, air-dried beef, yuca, and hot pepper sauce. The minister tried to excuse himself, citing a tight schedule, but the teachers insisted so much—with smiles hiding their need to impress—that he had no choice but to accept that improvised snack. The office filled with the greasy aroma of the empanadas, and for a moment, the bureaucratic tension dissolved in the crunch of crispy dough.

"And," Débora asked Humberto in a more informal tone, as they shared a cup of hot sauce with

their fried snacks, "why should we only send the best? Wouldn't it be better to reward the most disciplined?"

Humberto Bustamante lowered his gaze, just for a second, as though that word—"best"—still ached somewhere in his soul.

"It was my idea," he said, chewing slowly. "Do you know that in prison there are more disciplined people than educated ones? Nobody respects anybody there, but everyone follows orders, because the law is harsh, but it is the law."

"Education is one thing, respect another," Débora objected, the memory and guilt over the diligent student they'd just expelled still fresh in her mind.

"You'll be surprised to find that whoever is truly educated is necessarily kind. And I don't say that because I am, but because our Minister of Education is, as is our President, who has written a novel."

"Have you been to prison?" was Débora's blunt reply, her eyes narrowing.

Humberto shrugged, smiling with a calm that disarmed her.

"This government wants to give opportunities to those of us who think differently. Everyone asks themselves: how is it possible that in a country like the United States or France everything works well, and in Colombia it doesn't? Well, because if we want to be better, we have to change the rules of the game."

"I see," Débora nodded, realizing she'd ventured onto muddy ground. The hot pepper stung her mouth, but not as much as her curiosity about that plainly reformed bureaucrat.

On the way home in the IGAC Jeep Willys, the ride felt eternal to me. I feared my father would scold me for the expulsion, so I stayed silent, watching through the window as Bucaramanga's adobe houses and damp streets blurred past. Instead, he started whistling a salsa tune by Fruko y sus Tesos, treating the matter as though it were of no importance.

"What am I going to do now?" I asked, afraid he would tell me I'd have to work the streets from now on selling newspapers, or as a delivery boy for some shop, as I'd already seen several children in the city do.

"God knows how He does things," he answered, with a smile in the rearview mirror.

He then told me that, right at the start of January, my father had received a call from Senator Jácomo Mubarak's secretary. The phone had rung at home like an omen, and my father answered with a cautious voice.

"Hello, Jácomo!" he'd said, somewhat uneasy at what seemed to be urgent.

"I'm calling to warn you," the senator told him, his voice grave. "It seems one of your neighbors took a photo of an IGAC Jeep Willys carrying sacks of rice to your IDEMA shop."

"That's true…" my father answered, realizing he'd exposed himself unnecessarily to being fired, just to save the cost of a taxi ride. Using government vehicles for personal purposes was strictly forbidden by law, even though it was common for even the President himself to use the government's air force to travel on vacation with his family.

"As Cochise, our cycling champion, said recently in an interview: in Colombia, people die of no other illness than envy," Jácomo remarked, with a touch of bitter humor.

"I can't believe it!" David exclaimed, after a long pause. "Are they going to fire me?"

"That depends on your standing with the union."

My father exclaimed that he'd surely be fired then, since he had precisely refused to sign an order to embezzle a hundred thousand pesos from the Institute, and the report had been filed by Wiston Arenas, his neighbor, one of the union leaders.

"At least now you know who took the photo."

My father went pale.

"Is his wife still looking for a teaching position?" Jácomo then said, offering a deus ex machina solution.

"Of course!"

"Tell her to show up tomorrow at the Department of Education's office at the Governor's headquarters," Jácomo went on. "There's an opening for a teacher at the Rufino José Cuervo Institute."

"That'll be a great relief," David nodding.

With my mother's monthly income, it was no longer necessary to keep the IDEMA shop going, which, contrary to what my parents had calculated, had ended up running at a loss during our vacation. The shop had been left in the care of my two grandmothers, Kuki and Elvia, who had also stayed behind looking after the house while we lived it up on the coast.

A mother's love for her children led them to freely interpret an offhand remark my father had made when he said goodbye.

"Whatever the two of you need for groceries these two weeks," he told them with a broad smile, "feel free to take it from the shop."

After debating for three days what my father had meant by "whatever the two of you need," both of them organized Christmas grocery packages for their own sons and daughters across the city—fifteen in total—plus one more for their own households. Faithful to Gandhi's creed—who preached that the earth provides for everyone's needs, not for a few people's greed—and putting into practice the postulate of Proudhon, cited by Uncle Chico, according to which "property is theft," my grandmothers cleared out every shelf and extended their generosity all the way to the storeroom. That storeroom, which before our departure had been a room stacked to the ceiling with sacks of grain, rice, and flour, was reduced to three sad, meager sacks, a remnant our relatives preserved in their eagerness to prove to my parents that they hadn't sold everything.

The day of the Christmas "open market" was chaos my grandmothers would remember with a mix of philanthropy and guilt. Weeks earlier, on December 22nd, the aunts and uncles arrived at dawn, each with their vehicle ready to load up. The street in front of the shop turned into a hive of engines, horns, and shouts echoing all the way to the neighboring blocks.

Aunt Chavela, my mother's most easygoing sister and the most pragmatic in the family, was the first

to wake my grandmothers, at four in the morning. Kuki's favorite daughter, she had a cheerful, almost festive bearing, and a knowing look that had already won her two husbands since adolescence. She arrived in the yellow Dodge taxi belonging to her neighbor, Don Manuel, a flabby man who could barely move under his own bulk. My aunt, dressed in a floral blouse and a skirt down to mid-calf, brought with her a handwritten list on notebook paper, folded in four and tucked into her apron pocket.

"Mamá," she said, kissing Nonita's cheek, her eyes already scanning the shelves, "I came early so I wouldn't have trouble with the others. I need three sacks of rice, two of raw cane sugar, sugar, flour, oil…"

"Oh, dear, calm down. There's enough for everyone," Kuki smiled nervously, with no idea what was coming.

She had barely finished loading her things when Uncle Ramiro appeared, my father's younger brother, a semi-professional soccer player with thick arms and a thundering voice. He arrived in a borrowed truck, a red 1965 Chevrolet with new wooden side rails. His wife accompanied him, Helena, a slight woman with long chestnut hair that curled like wire at the ends, who seemed unable to rein in her husband's impulses.

"Elvia, dear Mamá!" he shouted from the sidewalk, without even getting out of the truck. "Send me everything you've got in beans and lentils! And don't forget the rice!"

"Ramiro, son, wait, your sister Eustaquia already asked to have some set aside for her…"

"Hasn't she arrived yet? Then she can wait!"

And seeing Aunt Chavela come out, not with a sack of flour, but with a case of Black & White whisky, the most valuable item in the whole storeroom, he added:

"I got here first!"

He hadn't arrived before everyone, but he was the first of his siblings; either way, he didn't bother with explanations: his booming voice was enough to impose his will.

Aunt Eustaquia, my father's sister, was the opposite: thin, her hair pulled into a tight bun, a stately 1960s dress, angular-framed glasses confirming her profession as a schoolteacher. She arrived in her light-blue 1950 Chevrolet, driven by her husband, Teobaldo, a man with a Chaplin-style moustache and slicked-back hair with a receding hairline, quiet, preferring to stay out of family disputes. She brought her two children, Luna and Severo, both dressed in their Sunday best, as though headed to Mass.

"Mamá," she said, in a soft but firm voice to my grandmother Elvia, "I thought the others would do their shopping tomorrow. You know I'm organizing the Christmas dinner for everyone else."

"Of course, dear, of course. Ramirito's already loading up, but as soon as he's done…"

"Ramiro?" Eustaquia took off her glasses and wiped them on the edge of her blouse, a gesture she made when annoyed. "And why did you tell him?"

"Because she loves us all equally, sister!" Ramiro shouted from the storeroom, carrying three jugs of

Superior aguardiente in one hand and a sack of rice over his shoulder as though it were a sack of feathers.

"Chavela got here before everyone and already took half of it!" my grandmother whispered to Eustaquia, with a pleading look, hoping she wouldn't make a scene.

After all, the Saint-Andrés were a family of pedigree, related to the first Colombian president after Simón Bolívar, General Santander.

Chavela, who was tying down her last bundle on the taxi's roof, spun around, indignant.

"I only took what was owed to me! Everyone's invited to spend this Christmas at my house! The one they call 'La Saporrita's place'!"

And she began singing the popular tune of that Christmas, that year's hit from the superband Don Filemón—something about dancing happily, having fun at La Saporrita's.

The revelry escalated as more relatives arrived. Uncle Javier, my mother's second brother, showed up in a white 1937 Ford truck with rusted-out floorboards, accompanied by his wife and two small children. He was a man in a pale-yellow suit and sky-blue tie, his prominent belly threatening to burst the last buttons of his immaculately white shirt, with a sparse moustache and nervous movements, always smiling.

"Mamá Kuki!" he shouted from the sidewalk. "I need sugar for the business! You know I've got the bakery, and without sugar there's no bread!"

"Oh, Javier, but Chavela already…"

"Chavela's a different matter! This is for work, not for the house!"

His wife, Prudencia, a robust woman with a shrill voice, joined the shouting.

"Besides, we have more mouths to feed! Two children who eat enough for four, Kuki, for four!"

"We've got some who eat enough for five!" Helena shouted from the truck, still smoothing her hair with a tortoiseshell-handled brush.

Aunt Lucía arrived just then in a taxi that stopped with a screech. Flirtatious and attractive, every man's eyes fell on her thigh-high laced patent-leather boots, and on her provocative miniskirt, following the latest English fashion trend of 1976, its ruffled neckline showing the base of her breasts, small copies of her round cheeks. Known in the family for her explosive temper and for never taking anyone's advice, Aunt Lucía carried two burlap sacks in each hand and a determination that cleared her own path.

"I'm here for my mother's share! Don't tell me I don't have priority!"

"Dear, calm down, there's enough…"

"Not anymore," Eustaquia said from inside. "Ramiro already took all the rice!"

"Exaggerating as usual!" Ramiro answered. "I've barely taken seven sacks!"

"Seven sacks!" Lucía shrieked. "That's enough for a whole year!"

"For my family, two months, if that! I've got kids who are growing!"

"Well my mother has my two sisters and me to feed, not counting our two nieces, my brother Benjamín, and Aunt Rosa!"

Lucía's argument went unnoticed amid the shouting. By then, the storeroom was a battlefield. Sacks dragged across the floor left trails of grain, boxes of raw cane sugar stacked up on the sidewalks, and neighbors began peering out through windows and doors, drawn by the commotion.

Doña Herminia, the neighbor across the street, Abhad's mother, a heavyset woman in an apron with curlers in her hair, came out onto the sidewalk, arms crossed.

"What's all this commotion? Are they closing out the store?"

"No, ma'am!" Chavela shouted, tying down the last bundle on her taxi. "It's a family matter!"

"Sounds like a cockfight to me," Herminia muttered, without moving from her observation post.

Don Bautista, Hortensio's father, was just leaving, neatly perfumed, his hair slicked back, when he saw the scene.

"Are they going to leave anything to sell, or take it all?" he asked, genuinely worried he'd have to shop outside the neighborhood this Christmas.

"Closed for family matters until 1976!" Eustaquia dismissed him with a smile from the doorway, trying to maintain some dignity.

But dignity was a luxury no one could afford amid that turmoil. Uncle Chico, my mother's youngest brother, arrived by bicycle with a cart tied on behind.

He was an acromegalic man, muscular, quick in his movements, always with a mischievous smile that hid his intentions.

"Nonita! I came for my share!"

"Sweetheart, my little one, but they already…"

"I don't care what the others took! I've invited everyone to a barbecue for the New Year's Day hangover!"

"If you'd gotten here earlier!" Chavela shouted. "I got here at four sharp! It's almost eight now!"

"Well I'm the youngest and I deserve some consideration!" Chico answered, pushing his cart inside.

Amid the chaos, Aunt Esperanza appeared, my mother's sister, a woman well along in years, her grey hair gathered into a bun, with the cheerful, defiant look of someone who had seen it all in life. She came with her housekeeper, a quiet girl carrying an empty grocery bag.

"Mamá," she said softly to Kuki, "I only came for a bit of rice, some Bogotá chocolate bars, two sacks of sugar, and a bit of grain. I don't want any trouble."

Kuki, on the verge of tears, hugged her daughter.

"Oh, Esperanza, if only everyone were like you…"

But Esperanza never had the chance to load anything. Ramiro, eager to grab another sack of beans, collided with Javier, who was carrying a box of raw cane sugar. The box crashed to the ground with a thud, breaking into pieces. The blocks of sugar shattered like clay bricks.

"Careless!" Javier shouted. "That sugar was for my bakery!"

"Watch where you're walking, then!" Ramiro answered, not letting go of his sack, and, pulling out a wad of bills, handed it to Nonita. "I actually pay for what I take! Or is everyone else here shopping for free?"

"That money doesn't even cover the wholesale price!" Lucía scoffed.

"You owe me for my sugar!" Javier insisted.

"Pick it up off the ground if you care so much!"

Javier, beside himself, lunged at Ramiro. The two men grappled in the middle of the storeroom, tripping over sacks and boxes. Eustaquia shouted for them to stop, Lucía tried to separate them, and Chavela, from outside, shouted for someone to call the police.

The grandmothers, Kuki and Elvia, ran back and forth, trying to calm everyone down while collecting the crumpled bills their offspring reluctantly stuffed into their apron pockets.

"Children, please!" Kuki begged. "It's Christmas!"

"Christmas with peasants!" Lucía shouted, using the very insult the Saint-André sisters had used to refer to my mother and her family ever since her wedding to my father. Nothing more offensive than the past of those who have climbed one or two social rungs, if not the whole ladder; my mother was the daughter of peasants who had gotten ahead because my grandfather agreed to work as a butcher in the Barichara marketplace.

Lucía took advantage of the general shock to grab a sack of sugar Javier had managed to set down behind the door.

"That sugar's mine!" Javier bellowed.

"It's nobody's! It's for our mother!"

"Well I'm Adelia's brother, and she's the one in charge of this shop!"

The fight spilled out into the street. The neighbors, who at first had only watched with curiosity, now formed a semicircle around the shop, delighting in the deplorable spectacle amid murmurs and laughter.

Nonita then revealed to Aunt Esperanza the hidden stash of inventory they'd kept aside to make it look, to my parents, as though not everything had been sold. Giving up her much-touted restraint, Aunt Esperanza emptied the sacks and returned only two cups' worth of each, so that at least it could be said not everything had sold.

"They know I can't do addition or subtraction," Nonita reassured her; "they'll just assume the customers cheated me while I was minding the shop, since Doña Elvia was busy elsewhere."

"Oh, Mamá!" Esperanza groaned, ashamed. "You're a paragon of virtue!"

"Look, there goes another sack," Herminia pointed with her finger. "And here I was hoping I wouldn't have to travel downtown for my Christmas grain shopping."

"That family has always been a scandal," Don Ernesto added, shaking his head, pleased to see that the

IDEMA store that had stolen so much of his own clientele would be out of stock this Christmas.

"Well, I'd like a shopping spree like that too," said Doña Adriana, hugging Tita, her three-year-old daughter.

"You have to be especially careful of relatives," Herminia explained. "They're going to bankrupt that shop!"

"And when will they reopen?"

"Closed for family matters!" Esperanza shouted, sweaty and disheveled, her once-smooth hair now a tangle of curls, trying to keep up some minimum of composure in front of strangers.

By mid-morning, the vehicles were loaded to the brim. Chavela's taxi looked ready to burst, bundles tied to its roof. Ramiro's truck carried a mountain of sacks covered by a tarp. Javier's truck dragged its weight with difficulty. Even Chico managed to fill his cart with sacks of grain and packets of pasta.

But the inventory wasn't infinite. By the time the last group of aunts arrived—Jazmín and Lila—only scraps remained: bags of salt, packets of ground coffee, a few broken blocks of raw sugar, and two sacks of rice and one of lentils that Kuki and Elvia had managed to hide under a tarp at the back of the storeroom.

"There's nothing left at all?" asked Uncle Potasio, the youngest of my mother's siblings, barely twenty, who had come with his girlfriend.

"Son, they took it all," Kuki said, her eyes filling with tears. "Your sister Chavela got here first, and…"

"Always Chavela!" Potasio protested. "She always takes the best!"

"There's a case of Sansón wine left in the kitchen!" Chavela shouted back, conciliatory, from her taxi, which was already pulling away down the street with a screech of tires.

Potasio went in before my grandmothers could warn him they had no permission to take anything from the kitchen supplies, but they held their tongues seeing his delight as he crated up 24 bottles of that wine, so prized during Christmas parties.

My parents would remember for decades, with indignation, how their siblings' liquor cabinets had filled up with that wine, along with jugs of Superior aguardiente, bottles of Black & White whisky, Domecq cognac, and Los Comuneros eggnog. Every time we visited our aunts and uncles, their bars stayed covered with sheets and towels, until one unexpected visit when Aunt Chavela didn't have time to cover hers, and my parents, wide-eyed, recognized the very bottles supposedly shared out by my grandmothers during their Christmas novenas.

By the end of the morning, the grandmothers sat in the shop's chairs, exhausted, their aprons full of crumpled bills they hadn't even counted. The shelves were empty, the floor covered in spilled grain, broken boxes, and wrappings of raw sugar.

"What are we going to tell David and Adelia?" Kuki looked at Elvia and sighed.

"The truth," Elvia answered, wiping her brow. "We'll tell them everything sold."

But they couldn't keep the secret for long. When my parents came back from the coast on January 7th, tired but happy after two weeks at the hotel, it was the neighbors who took it upon themselves to inform them.

Doña Herminia came out to greet them the moment she saw the Jeep Willys pull up in front of the house.

"Oh, David, Adelia! So glad you're back!" she said, with that mix of curiosity and gossip so characteristic of her. "You two missed quite the show."

"What show?" my mother asked, unloading her bags.

"Why, the one on the 22nd! The fight over the groceries! We thought you were closing out the store!"

My father went pale.

"A fight?"

Don Ernesto came over from his own shop, wiping his hands on his apron.

"Just a bit of shoving between laughs and good cheer, Don David," he said, softening his gossip with an air of understanding. "All your brothers- and sisters-in-law showed up, in trucks, taxis, even one on a bicycle with a two-wheeled cart. They took everything. There was shoving and fighting… even the police came by to see what the commotion was."

"Everything?" My mother clutched her purse to her chest.

"You can imagine!" Herminia confirmed. "Even the boxes of raw sugar. Your sister Chavela was first; she got here at dawn and woke up half the

neighborhood with her loud laughter. Then Ramiro with a truck…"

My father didn't wait to hear more. He went into the house and straight to the shop. The empty shelves, the floor covered in spilled grain, and the acrid smell of the storeroom, its scattered grain having drawn cockroaches, confirmed what he already suspected. My mother followed him in silence, and when she saw the wreckage, she covered her mouth with one hand.

The grandmothers sat in the kitchen, waiting for them with expressions of barely concealed guilt.

"David, son…" Elvia began.

"Adelia, my dear…" Kuki wrung her hands.

My mother said nothing. She turned around, walked to her room, and shut the door. The sound of her muffled crying carried through the walls.

My father, for his part, took a deep breath and approached his mothers.

"How much did you sell?"

The grandmothers pulled the wads of crumpled bills from their aprons. They hadn't even counted them.

"Here's everything they paid us," Kuki said, her voice trembling.

My father took the money and put it away without counting it.

"Thank you for looking after the house," he said simply, and went out to the courtyard.

I, who had witnessed the whole thing from the doorway, dared to ask later:

"Why is the shop so empty?"

"That Marco!" my grandmother Elvia smiled, with that charm I loved so much. "Always so reckless!"

What my parents wouldn't learn until weeks later, when Aunt Esperanza told them, in tears of shame, was that every one of the siblings—absolutely every one—had thrown celebrations with what they'd taken from the shop.

Aunt Chavela, who had been first to arrive and taken three sacks of rice, two of raw sugar, and boxes of flour, organized a pigeon soup feast on December 24th that lasted two days. She invited all her children and grandchildren, and cooked in a pot so big it looked like a bathtub. Her courtyard filled with improvised tables made of planks and sawhorses, piled high with ribs in blood-red pots, yuca, plantain, and corn on the cob. The raw sugar melted into pots of hot cane-sugar water served all day long, and children ran between the adults with pieces of freshly baked bread in their hands.

Uncle Ramiro, with his truck full of sacks, decided they had to celebrate big. On December 25th he threw a barbecue that started at noon and ended past midnight. He got hold of an enormous grill, bought ten capons with money he'd saved for another purpose, and slow-cooked them over cloth-wrapped coals while drinking beer with his brothers-in-law. White rice was served on pewter trays, and beans simmered in clay pots that never fully emptied. His wife, proud of the gathering's success, made arepas on a griddle that didn't rest all day.

Javier, with his sugar and flour, opened his bakery during the holidays and gave bread away to the

whole family. But not just any bread: he made pandeyucas, pandebonos, sweet rolls, and even *Brazos de Reina*. It didn't matter that all he offered them for the meal itself was bone broth soup. Everyone ate happily, and he felt generous, as though that flour and sugar were the fruit of his own labor.

Lucía, who hadn't lied about her wide network of relations in the Mutis neighborhood, organized a mute stew on December 28th. She invited her neighbors, her *comadres*, even people from the neighborhood she barely knew. She cooked rice with giblets in a pot that had belonged to her grandmother, and served it with fried ripe plantains glistening with oil. The raw sugar dissolved into frothy hot chocolate to accompany that rainy afternoon, and no one asked where all that cocoa had come from.

Aunt Eustaquia, more discreet than the rest, organized a family dinner on December 31st. She prepared a chicken and rice dish that smelled heavenly, served with toasted, stewed goat her husband had found at the market. The chickpeas came out perfect, creamy and seasoned with fresh cilantro, and dessert was a caramel and cheese confection that brought the older relatives to tears of nostalgia.

Potasio, the youngest and most mischievous, decided January 1st was the perfect day for a communal lunch. He cooked a lentil and tripe soup so thick it looked like a stew, and served it with white rice and avocado. He invited his friends, his *compadres*, and even his current girlfriend, a shy girl who watched him with adoration as he strutted between the tables.

Esperanza, the only one who'd arrived humbly, prepared a catfish stew on January 3rd. And, just like the rest, all her brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews, grandchildren, her extended family, and Nonita, all came to share in her abundance.

Everyone celebrated, settling the grocery-day scuffle, a memory that dissolved into Christmas joys, becoming instead a wellspring of jokes and shared complicity. From December 24th through January 6th, the siblings' houses filled with the smoke of cooking fires, drunken laughter, children's shouts as they ran about, and the ever-present smell of rice, grain, and raw sugar. They felt generous, as though those sacks and boxes belonged to them by right. No one mentioned David and Adelia, no doubt so as not to dampen the December celebrations, which wouldn't have been so lavish had they not taken advantage of the blank check David, whether by mistake, or out of boastfulness, or carelessness, had handed my grandmothers in exchange for watching over his appliances against the thieves then roaming the city. No one felt guilty, except perhaps Esperanza, who cried a couple of times when we went to visit her months later.

On January 7th, when my parents came back, the celebrations were already over. The sacks were empty, the boxes broken, and the pots put away until the next holiday. All that remained were the neighbors with their gossip, the grandmothers with their crumpled bills, and a shop that looked like the skeleton of what it once had been.

The losses to the IDEMA inventory had been a setback, but even more so was the looming shadow of my father's dismissal from the Agustín Codazzi Institute. Our finances, already strained by the costs of the vacation trip to the coast and our stay at the Hotel del Prado, kept my father up at night. On top of that came the cost of Gabriela's enrollment at Colegio La Misericordia, the best institution for young ladies of the middle class in the city, and mine, the best and most expensive public school for what was then, euphemistically, called "the modest class."

This context explains why my father received the news of my expulsion from the Anexa not as bad news, but as a financial relief. Since my mother now worked at an elementary school in the Lagos III neighborhood, what better place to enroll me than there, with tuition fully subsidized by the government?

That very afternoon, while my father drove me home in the Jeep Willys, in the office of the *Escuela Anexa a la Normal*, an emergency meeting was taking place that I did not witness, but which, years later, I reconstructed with near-forensic precision.

Teacher Remedios summoned Débora and three other teachers—Aunt Eustaquia, Soledad, and Teresa—the moment the minister and his party left the building. The afternoon sun slanted in through the windows, casting long shadows over the worn tile floor. The fan kept turning with its monotonous creak, and the portrait of President López Michelsen seemed to watch them from its yellowed frame.

"Sit down, please," Remedios said, in that tone she used when she wanted to appear in control amid chaos.

The teachers obeyed. Aunt Eustaquia settled into the wicker chair with a sigh. Soledad, thin and nervous, sat on the edge of her seat, as though ready to bolt. Teresa, her makeup and hair styled fashionably, her nails freshly painted, folded her hands in her lap with an impassive expression. Débora remained standing, leaning against the filing cabinet.

"You already know why I called you here," Remedios began, clasping her hands on the desk. "The Ministry of Education wants us to send fifteen children to the Club del Cañón. The top three from each grade, first through fifth."

"And what's the problem?" Aunt Eustaquia asked, though her tone made clear she already knew.

Remedios took a deep breath, as though the words physically cost her something.

"The problem is that they're rewarding the outstanding children of 1975, and the third-place student in first grade is no longer at this school."

Silence. The fan made two full turns before anyone spoke.

"You expelled him this morning," Débora said, no inflection in her voice.

"We expelled him," Remedios corrected, looking at her sternly. "We all agreed."

"Not me," Soledad murmured, lowering her gaze.

"You didn't say anything when I asked," Remedios answered coldly.

Teresa spoke up, with the measured voice of someone who has seen too many injustices to keep feeling outraged over each one.

"The Saint-André boy was a problem, yes. But he was also third academically. And now we have no one to send."

"Then we send fourth place," Débora proposed, straightening up. "That's the solution the ministry's manuals prescribe when a student leaves school for a case of force majeure."

Remedios shook her head.

"We can't. The Ministry will review the lists, the report cards, everything. If we send fourth place, they'll find out why it wasn't third."

"That boy won't find a spot at any school with a zero in conduct and discipline."

"I've reviewed and reconsidered that matter with Eustaquia," Remedios sighed, her face tired. "His grade will be a two out of five in both categories."

"The saving aunt!" Débora said, mockingly.

"I didn't intercede for my nephew, Débora," my aunt replied. "I only pointed out that a zero in conduct could be interpreted as cruelty on the school's part. After all, little Marco didn't fatally injure another child, as has happened at other schools."

"Oh, no? And a broken tooth is nothing to you?"

Remedios raised her hand with authority, signaling there was no reason to prolong such byzantine arguments.

"A boy with a zero in conduct can turn into, as Eustaquia points out, a social scandal that draws too much attention," she said, in a calm voice. "You all already know the novel *A Woman with a Four in Conduct*, by Jaime Sanín Echeverri."

"It was published in 1948," Débora nodded, taking her seat, understanding the scale of the mistake they would have made by giving him a zero in conduct.

"I read it," Remedios said. "It's the portrait of a lustful woman who dares to live outside Christian morality."

"Tell us about it!" Teresa asked, leaning forward.

"It's the story of Helena," Remedios explained, folding her hands on the desk, "a woman who defies the norms imposed by a hypocritical, religious society. From a young age she was singled out for thinking differently, for loving without permission, for refusing to be the obedient wife everyone expected. Her rebellion marked her with a 'four' in conduct, a grade enough to condemn her for life. She lived the loves she wanted, was rejected, judged, and ended up alone, but true to herself. Deep down, Sanín portrays her not as a sinner, but as a brave woman paying the price of freedom."

"Ah…" Débora murmured, lowering her gaze. "So that's why the two."

"Exactly," Remedios concluded, gravely. "As you can see, if even a four in conduct could bring us

criticism for grading a child who, like that heroine, questions our deeply rooted customs and manners, what would they say about a zero? So, in true Solomon's-judgment fashion, we've decided to give him a two."

"A wise decision," Débora nodded. "Marco could grow up to be a fine construction helper, or even a day laborer. Didn't you mention you had an uncle with the strength of Mister Atlas, Eustaquia?"

The room burst into cathartic laughter.

"With that grade," Remedios declared, "I can assure you no school in this city will accept him."

"Floridablanca will," Aunt Eustaquia cut in.

"With a two in conduct?" Teresa asked.

"Adelia, his mother, was also a graduate of the Normal. And just last week we learned she's now working as a teacher at the Rufino José Cuervo School, in Lagos III."

"That school is a slum!" Débora exclaimed, her smile twisted with rage. "It's right next to the stream that carries the whole municipality's sewage, the one they call La Calavera—Skull Creek!"

The teachers broke into related, if exaggerated, comments about that school.

"Are you telling us," Remedios thundered, silencing their voices, "you're certain Marco will keep studying at that reeking school?"

Aunt Eustaquia nodded, a gesture that surprised even the student teachers who, without a word, had been watching the meeting.

"And so," Débora went pale, "we'll have to explain that we expelled him the same day the minister arrived?"

"My God," Soledad whispered, covering her mouth with a hand. "What if the government finds out?"

"No one's going to report us," Remedios said firmly. "But we need a solution. Now."

Aunt Eustaquia leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees.

"And what do you propose?"

Remedios fell silent for a moment, drumming her fingers on the desk. The gesture betrayed her nervousness, though she tried to hide it.

"We could," she began slowly, "send someone else. Someone who deserves it, and who shields us from future questions."

"Who?" Teresa asked, arching an eyebrow.

"A child who has suffered," Remedios said, looking directly at Débora. "A child who was a victim of Marco Saint-André's criminal acts."

Débora narrowed her eyes and let out an uneasy gasp.

"Do you mean Eliseo Cardona?"

"Exactly."

The name fell like a stone into a pond. The ripples spread through the room, and each teacher reacted in her own way. Soledad nodded enthusiastically, relieved to find a way out. Aunt Eustaquia frowned, calculating the implications. Teresa

remained impassive, though a slight movement of her lips betrayed her disapproval.

"Eliseo Cardona," Débora repeated, savoring the name. "The boy Marco tripped. The one whose front tooth got chipped."

"The one we also coached into reporting him, in fair retaliation," Remedios added.

"The one we all owe thanks to," Débora declared, "with his chipped tooth, for freeing us of Marco's costly questions."

"Asking questions isn't a crime," Soledad cut in.

"You don't know him, dear," Débora sighed. "Has he ever asked you, for instance, why none of us supervise the children during recess, when the teachers' handbook says we're supposed to?"

"Well…" Soledad mused, "maybe he says that because, if one of us had been there, perhaps he wouldn't have had to deal with so many problems."

Débora let out a laugh, skeptical.

"We have a devil's advocate among us today!"

"You'd think that vandal was a meek little dove!" Remedios said, with an exaggeratedly compassionate tone.

Teresa let out an almost inaudible sigh.

"Eliseo Cardona isn't third place," she said calmly. "He's not even in the top five."

"But he's a victim," Remedios answered. "And this program doesn't only aim to reward academic excellence, but also to recognize effort. Eliseo tries hard. Despite his hatred of math, he keeps improving."

"Because his mother hired him a private tutor," Teresa murmured.

Remedios ignored her for a few seconds, until she turned toward her with sudden sharpness.

"You witnessed the incident. You saw how Marco pretended he hadn't tripped him. Don't you think Eliseo deserves some compensation?"

Teresa didn't answer right away. There was something about that proposal that struck her as both convenient and repugnant. She looked out the window, toward the courtyard where the children kept playing, oblivious to their teachers' schemes.

"And how do we justify to the Ministry sending a child who isn't in the top ranks?" she finally asked.

"We don't have to justify anything," Remedios answered. "The Ministry asked for the top three from each grade. We're sending fifteen children. Period. No one's going to check rank by rank. They have twenty schools to oversee."

"And if they do check?" Teresa pressed.

"We'll say there was an administrative error. That the report cards got mixed up. That Eliseo was promoted after a special evaluation."

"That would be a lie," Teresa said, without raising her voice.

"*Errare humanum est*," Remedios insisted. "And if we're found out, I'll take full responsibility. Then I'll tell the truth, and nothing but the truth."

Aunt Eustaquia stepped in, with her usual pragmatism.

"It seems fine to me. Eliseo is a good boy. Quiet, obedient. He won't cause trouble at the Club del Cañón. And his family is influential. His parents are thriving with their frozen chicken processing plant. This would be a great opportunity to get in their good graces, after our carelessness with his teeth."

"Our carelessness?" Débora scoffed.

"That's exactly why I never leave my students alone, not even for a minute," Teresa shot back.

"His tooth would have fallen out anyway," Débora retorted. "It was a baby tooth, and his permanent one is already coming in."

"I think Eliseo earned that opportunity with his broken tooth," Soledad cut in, with almost religious fervor. "That boy has suffered so much because of Marco Saint-André... Doesn't he deserve something good?"

Teresa looked at all of them, one by one, and finally shrugged.

"Let the record show I dissent from what I consider an injustice."

"Is there a record of these decisions?" Débora scoffed sarcastically.

"It won't be necessary," Remedios answered, standing and straightening the presidential portrait. "We're simply reflecting on this opportunity for a bit of poetic justice at our school."

"I'd call it manipulation," Teresa murmured, but so quietly only Débora heard her.

Remedios stood, ending the meeting with that gesture.

"Then it's decided. Eliseo Cardona will go to the Club del Cañón representing second grade's third place. I'll handle adjusting the paperwork. Soledad, you'll speak with Eliseo's mother first thing tomorrow. Tell her that her son was selected as recognition for his efforts. Don't mention Marco Saint-André."

"And if she asks?" Soledad said.

"Tell her it was a comprehensive evaluation. That it included behavior, attendance, and perseverance."

"I can already see frozen chickens arriving at this office," Teresa sang, standing up.

"Didn't you once get a coastal cheese from Eugenia's father's farm?" Remedios snapped at her, with a smile that didn't reach her eyes.

The teachers left the office in silence. The sun had begun to set, tinting the courtyard a sweltering orange. The children had already gone home, and only the echo of their voices remained on the peeling walls.

Teresa was the last to leave. Before crossing the doorway, she turned back to Remedios.

"You know? Marco Saint-André really was unbearable, yes. But I think we were too hasty expelling him. We know that porcelain lid was already cracked. Besides, no one understood the multiplication tables better than he did."

Remedios looked up from the papers she was already sorting.

"Brilliance without discipline is worth nothing, Teresa."

"And is discipline the same as silence? What good does it do you to read a novel that critiques society, if you never relate it to your own life?"

Remedios didn't answer. She lowered her eyes to the documents and began writing, as though Teresa were no longer there. To her, the world of letters belonged to bohemians, dreamers, poets, and politicians, with no bearing whatsoever on harsh reality.

Teresa walked out into the hallway, where the light of dusk filtered through the windows in golden stripes. She walked unhurried, feeling the weight of what had just been decided. If she had been wrong, the guilt and the remorse would be hers alone, not Remedios's. She knew that, with her signature, she had thrown her own pupil into the well of rebels, from which he would surely not emerge until the final judgment, where Remedios would justify her decision by pointing to Marco's own defense of the damned in Hell.

At his home, Eliseo Cardona ate dinner with his mother, unaware that his fate had just been changed in an air-conditioned office, thanks to an unjust expulsion and the desperate need of a group of teachers to cover up their own mistakes.

And I, Marco Saint-André, rode home in the Jeep Willys, staring out the window, not yet aware of the web our enemies were weaving.

Chapter 8. The Rufino José Cuervo School

The next day, after lunch at noon, my mother walked me to the highway, where we caught a public bus. The midday sun fell like boiling jelly over the hot asphalt, and the air was thick with the exhaust of vehicles roaring around us. I dragged my feet, my heart still pounding from the memories of the Anexa, that cloister of desks where my efforts had been lost battles. My mother, in her pleated skirt and immaculate white blouse, walked upright, as though nothing had happened, but I noticed the tension in her jaw, the way she gripped my hand a little tighter than necessary.

"You'll study in the afternoons now," she told me on the way, as the bus glided along the newly paved highway from Bucaramanga to Floridablanca. "We'll spend more time together, and you'll help me with housework in the mornings, since now, with your father in the process of being let go, we can't afford the luxury of a housekeeper."

Her words were a balm and a sentence at once. Spending time with her sounded like redemption, but the morning chores…

I didn't know then that my childish frustration was a reflection of a much larger crisis. In the Colombia of 1976, the middle class—like ours, with a father who'd completed five semesters of civil engineering, now working away on government assignments, and a

mother who was a teacher—stood on the edge of a precipice. The country's economy, still marked by the oil and coffee boom of the sixties, was beginning to wobble under inflation and rising unemployment. Families like mine, who had aspired to a stable life, watched as layoffs at state and private companies eroded their status. Moving from the *Escuela Anexa a la Normal*, with its painted classrooms and mandatory uniforms evoking bourgeois airs, to a free public school in a raw-brick neighborhood like Lagos III, was like descending three flights of the social staircase. It wasn't just a change of scenery; it was a brutal reminder that social mobility in Colombia was a myth for most people, a dream that evaporated with the economic crisis. Middle-class children, like me, were raised to dream of private universities and office jobs, but a family setback threw us into the maelstrom of public schools, where poverty wasn't just a lack of money, but a lack of opportunity, of influential friendships, of that invisible shield separating the "decent" from the "lower" classes.

The bus arrived, a quarter to one, at a broad, paved parking lot facing a grey brick building that read: "RUFINO JOSÉ CUERVO SCHOOL." We got off and crossed a raw iron door, rusted by the region's eternal rains. The smell of damp earth and yuca stew wrapped around me like a rough but comforting blanket. My mother introduced me to the headmistress of the Rufino José Cuervo School, Teacher Sara, who also served as the homeroom teacher for second grade, the class in which I would continue my studies. Sara was plump, short, with cropped hair and bulging light-blue

eyes that seemed to scan one's soul. She wore a two-piece red-and-white terlenka suit, fashionable that decade, and thick, high-heeled shoes that increased her height, but not her imposing authority.

Teacher Sara read my first-grade report card with nods of approval, her lips pursed in a line of agreement, then, with horror, the report of my grades from my first two-month term of 1976. Her eyes went wide at the crumpled paper my mother handed her.

"A two in conduct and discipline?" she asked, her voice an echo of disbelief bouncing off the bare walls of her office.

"We were told they'd give him a zero," my mother nodded, with that mix of wounded pride and determination so characteristic of her.

Sara then looked at me, leaning over the improvised desk made of wooden boards.

"Are you going to behave in my class?" she asked me, smiling, but with an edge in her voice that made me swallow hard.

"Of course," I nodded, my voice a trembling thread. In my mind, I relived the beatings at the Anexa, Eliseo's screams, and silently swore that here I would be invisible, perfect, a boy who caused no trouble.

"He was a very wise man from Bogotá," I said. "He loved words very much and studied how Spanish is spoken and written. He also knew Latin, a very ancient language that today only very intelligent people study."

"You're lucky to have me as your teacher," Sara nodded with a smile, straightening up. "Your mommy

has a reputation as the strictest teacher in the whole school."

Sara wasn't exaggerating. During future recesses I watched my mother extend her class time with children she punished by keeping them from recess, pulling their sideburns until they cried out in pain and correctly answered her multiplication-table questions. In the seventies, public schools like this one, in Bucaramanga's working-class neighborhoods, were extensions of the social control the State and the Church imposed on the children of the lower and lower-middle classes. Discipline wasn't just order; it was a mechanism for molding restless children—like me—into future docile workers.

My arrival, with my synthetic-leather satchel inherited from the Anexa, marked me as an intruder: a middle-class child fallen on hard times, whose mother was a teacher but whose family now counted every cent. The other children, with mended shoes and faded shirts, looked at me with a curiosity tinged with wariness. Was I the "fancy boy" who'd come to judge them, or just one more in the daily struggle for a desk?

My new school was a large yellow-dirt courtyard surrounded by classrooms with raw cement-block walls and Eternit tile roofs over triangulated iron beams. The windows were wide, standard iron and glass, letting in Santander's dusty sunlight, and the splintered wooden doors creaked with every push. I fit in right away, since, truth be told, I found little architectural difference from my previous school; that one had been bigger, with tile floors and a waxy smell trying to imitate European

cleanliness, but here there were fewer students. The only novelty was that here, we children swept and mopped the classroom in turns, something I already knew how to do from early childhood. At the Anexa, cleaning had been a task supervised and perfected by housekeepers; here it was a collective responsibility that united us in the communion of a gleaming tile floor, with no supervision.

But to me, the son of a household where Matilde, our housekeeper, came and went according to the ups and downs of our family finances, it was a sharp reminder of our decline. In the seventies, free public schools like Rufino José Cuervo, born of the post-1950 educational expansion under the National Front, served the children of laborers, street vendors, and families displaced by rural violence. Primary school coverage had reached 100% by 1970, but quality was another story: overcrowded classrooms in urban centers, but in neighborhoods like Lagos III, near the highway, overcrowding mixed with neglect. My change of school wasn't only geographical; it was social. From a setting where children talked about vacations on the family farm, to one where conversations revolved around who had eaten an arepa that morning.

The first few days were a whirlwind of contradictory sensations. Walking into the second-grade classroom, the reek of children's sweat and chalk hit me like a wave. My classmates—a dozen faces, white, yellow, and brown, weathered by the sun—scanned me from their mismatched desks.

"That's Teacher Adelia's son," someone whispered, and I immediately became a mythical figure: the boy who came from "up there," from a school where punishments were dealt with a metal-edged wooden ruler, not the ear-pulling and pinching that left bruises. But it wasn't envy I saw in their eyes; it was a raw solidarity, born of the same struggle against a system that saw us as numbers in an educational census.

The harshness of my new world made itself felt the following week, when the country's unions called a national transport strike. It began without warning, in the afternoon, so that when classes let out, there wasn't a single bus available at the Lagos III terminal to take us home.

Trucks, vans, and private cars screeched at every corner, packed with passengers, some even perched on the roofs. My mother walked uncomfortably on her high-heeled shoes—the fashion in 1976—pulling my arm firmly while raising her other hand to ask for a spot in some vehicle. But it was already too late: only a motorcycle with a couple offered us a ride, and my mother turned it down, given the imminent danger of a fall.

In the end she joined the caravan of students and teachers who lived in the La Cumbre, Zapamanga, Lagos I, and Diamante I neighborhoods, and we set off walking single file along the concrete drainage channel that served as the highway's runoff between Floridablanca and Bucaramanga. At first I was uneasy about walking along a path reserved for semi trucks and fast-moving cars, but after a few minutes I found I

enjoyed the trek. We children paired off and laughed about the scenes we had just witnessed: a Lada pickup with people hanging from the doors like clusters of grapes, another with passengers standing shoulder to shoulder in the cargo bed and sitting precariously atop the cab; a motorcycle carrying six people, and a tiny Simca with twelve.

The ritual repeated itself twice a day for a week, until the government negotiated satisfactory terms with the union leaders.

In the Colombia of that time, public education was the great failed equalizer: it promised free access, but its services and facilities reeked of scarcity and fostered inequality. Middle-class children who fell into it—like me—had innocence on our side, which kept us from seeing that decline as anything beyond the novelty of a change of scenery, but for our parents it was a reminder of my social depreciation. My mother had already warned me:

"There's no time for foolishness here; these children have no sports center other than the central courtyard, and instead of studying from books and course readers, they study the notes they copy off the blackboard. Don't distract them in class; their dignity is equal to, or greater than, that of the children at the Anexa."

And she was right. During the months I studied there, not once did a classmate ask me to treat him to a serving of potatoesor a soda, as happened at the Anexa, where begging or scrounging was a daily problem. Here, precariousness was collective, a veil covering everyone;

but my arrival stirred the waters: was I a bridge to another world, or just a reminder of what they would never have?

It was my father who then bought Gabriela and me matching "World Brands" sticker albums one Friday, back from one of his assignment trips, along with ten packets of stickers for each of us. He arrived exhausted, the dust of the highways clinging to his worn suit, but with that smile that lit up the house on weekends.

In the seventies, sticker albums were an accessible luxury for a struggling middle class, a cheap escape from reality. I filled mine diligently, gluing the stickers with vegetable glue under the dining room's yellow light bulb. These, unlike the previous ones, were round, brightly colored; they looked like tiny gems to my eyes, at a time when comic strips were beginning to catch my interest, all the more now that I knew how to read. Each little sticker was a portal: airplanes crossing impossible skies, gleaming cars that contrasted with our old Jeep Willys, exotic flowers I'd never see in Bucaramanga's dry hills. For a boy like me, restless and punished for my own energy, those albums also fostered a dilemma: keep them as a family treasure, or share them at school, where I might come across as boastful before my scruffier classmates?

When I asked my father if I could open Gabriela's packets, he said no, they were hers, but that I could trade her for something else. So, handing over ten of my *maras*—those glass marbles that had been my currency in the Anexa's courtyard—I got another 30

stickers. I already had fifty, ten of them duplicates, but I was still missing a hundred. Trading was an art I quickly learned at Rufino José Cuervo, where the clay-earth courtyard turned into an improvised bazaar. My classmates, children of families living in Floridablanca's new housing developments, like Lagos or Bucarica, brought marbles won in fierce tournaments, or stickers stolen from their parents' cigarette packs.

Since few of my classmates spoke to me, I sought out the company of another equally ostracized student: Francisco, whom everyone called Pepe or Pepito. He had brown, curly hair, freckled skin, and a laugh that burst like firecrackers at patron-saint festivals. He loved stickers as much as I did. I finally showed him my World Brands album; since he had no money to buy his own, I suggested we fill mine together. We took turns keeping the album—a week at his house, a week at mine—and while I bought stickers with my allowance, Pepito got his by playing marbles, a game at which he was the best in the whole school.

Pepito became my aide-de-camp in that sea of new faces. The reason the other boys in class avoided him was his stark poverty: his family lived in a makeshift house under the highway bridge, an underworld the lower-middle-class children—with their prefabricated houses—looked upon with wariness. I paid no mind to such discrimination, since I already saw the world the way Shakespeare and Calderón did, a succession of settings no less interesting than the last.

At Rufino José Cuervo, where many children arrived without having had breakfast—as my mother

told me, citing reports from the Ministry of Education—stickers were a shared luxury that erased class lines. I, with my new album, was the temporary "rich kid"; but when Pepito won a game of marbles and gave me a silver toy airplane, I felt our shared need made us equal. Even so, a certain tension pulsed beneath the surface: at home, my father reminded me that "not everything is meant to be shared with just anyone," an echo of the Colombia of the seventies, where the middle classes clung to their distinctions so as not to fall entirely. In modest neighborhoods like Lagos III, rural-to-urban migration had swelled public schools; children like Pepito, sons of day laborers, made up sixty percent of enrollment, according to the statistics my mother brought back from her teachers' meetings. My presence, with fashionable clothes and a sharpened pencil, was a reminder of that gap: the middle class dreamed of private education to perpetuate its status, but the crisis pushed us into public schools, where "integration" was merely a euphemism for forced assimilation.

I found, on the other hand, a great advantage: snacks at Rufino José Cuervo were cheaper and, without a doubt, more delicious. Nowhere else in the world have I tasted potatoes as exquisite as the ones from that school. They called them *papas chorreadas*, soaked in a dark red stew of lard, tomato, garlic, and finely chopped onion, seasoned with the wisdom of Doña Petronila, the octogenarian woman who prepared them at home and brought them at recess, a widow with lively eyes and a teenager's smile, who served them in

generous spoonfuls, as though every portion were an act of resistance against hardship.

They cost barely five cents, and my father, faithful to a habit inherited from his father and grandfathers, sacredly gave me thirty cents a day as an allowance for my mid-morning snack. With that I could buy six portions, and I often shared with Pepito, who arrived empty-handed, his freckled smile lighting up the yellow-dirt courtyard. At the Anexa, snacks had been expensive, bland empanadas, priced in a way that marked the gap between comfortably middle-class children and those who barely had money for a soda. Here, *papas chorreadas* were a survival ritual, a delicacy that pushed back hunger with ingenuity and united us in the communion of a shared plate, a simple feast that, as I learned years later, carried within it an ancestral legacy.

Decades later, in 2011, standing before Vincent van Gogh's *The Potato Eaters* at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, I probed the depths and the dignity of that school scene. The painting, made in 1885, showed a Dutch peasant family gathered under the dim light of a lamp, sharing a plate of steaming potatoes. There was no misery in their faces, only an austere strength, a silent solidarity that echoed that of my classmates at Rufino José Cuervo, who, stomachs growling, shared laughter and marbles in the dusty courtyard. The earthy tones of the canvas, the dull sheen of the potatoes, the warmth of the lamp uniting the family: all of it transported me back to Bucaramanga, to those raw-brick ledges that served us as stools, where hardship was aided by

providential chance. That image, which I had already appreciated and shared at twenty, as an assistant on a national television program, taught me that the potato was not merely food; it was Ariadne's thread through the labyrinth of displacement, a viaduct between the Colombia of the seventies and the Europe of the nineteenth century, where scarcity forged heroes too.

In works like Germán Arciniegas's *The Green Continent*, I read that the Columbian Exchange transformed the world. The potato, along with corn and yuca, revolutionized food security after Columbus's arrival. In Europe, where famines decimated populations, the potato became a lifeline. Arciniegas's thesis found an echo in historians like William H. McNeill, in *The Global Condition*, who holds that the potato's nutritional value ensured its cultivation in soils where wheat failed, transforming lands once reserved for grazing into sources of life. In the equatorial regions of Africa, yuca—cassava—fed millions, while in the tropics and colder lands, the potato allowed the poor to raise larger families. Robert Fogel, in *The Escape from Hunger and Premature Death*, documents how, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the potato contributed to the increased average height of the Irish, Germans, and Scandinavians, whose bodies, stunted by medieval malnutrition, regained vigor thanks to that Andean tuber, rich in vitamin C, potassium, and carbohydrates. At Rufino José Cuervo we too ate the same food that had changed history, strengthening us to survive, the secret preparation with which Gaia, mother earth, nourished us day by day.

My mother often reminded me how fortunate I was, since we never once, during my childhood, went hungry at our table, while several of my classmates arrived at class with empty stomachs—forty percent of children in Bucaramanga's public schools, according to reports from that era.

Being the son of the feared Teacher Adelia continued to set me apart from my other classmates that month. At recess, playing marbles in the dirt, they'd surround me: "Does your mom hit you with a ruler, or a belt?" I laughed nervously, but it hurt inside. Being "the teacher's son" was both a shield and a burden; in a society where public education was the only social ladder for the poor, my mother represented an unreachable authority, and I, her extension, a spy child who never quite fit in.

Paradoxically, the free education at Rufino José Cuervo proved better than that of the expensive, high-minded Anexa a la Normal. Teacher Sara's classes were a dance of questions and answers, where my raised hand was welcomed, but always under her scrutinizing gaze. Here I had adult teachers, with long years of experience, who mastered their subjects; at the Anexa, my questions annoyed the student teachers, high-school girls our teachers delegated their responsibilities to, part of a Kafkaesque bureaucracy that tolerated nothing but obedience and silence.

My performance at school was remarkable from the start, and gradually my classmates, especially the girls, became my friends without prejudice. In social studies, we learned about Colombia's independence,

but with a local slant: heroes from Santander, like Santander himself, who spoke of liberty but who hadn't been able to prevent the rampant poverty of Lagos III.

My greatest joy was the absence of calligraphy and architectural drawing classes. Those skills were meant to be woven into every subject, and only once a month did Sara check our notebooks.

"Why do you write so crookedly?" she asked me, unfazed.

I said nothing, and she examined the palm of my hand.

"Why do you sweat so much?" she added.

"I'm afraid you're going to whip me."

Sara laughed and handed the notebook back.

"From now on, put talcum powder on your hands before you write."

I thought I'd won her over, but the following Monday my mother summoned me to face my father with my notebooks. I had to listen once again to her anguished speech, growing more urgent, until it broke out into a whipping over my bad calligraphy.

"If you can't even write," he snapped at me amid my groans, "what are you going to be in this life?"

In math, I shone: I solved sums on the board while others struggled with numbers, a legacy of afternoons spent with my father adding up his commission accounts. My good grades at Rufino José Cuervo did not ease my deep-seated fears. What would happen if I failed? Would we go back to the Anexa, or worse, would I have to work as a laborer with Uncle Roberto, as my mother had once warned me?

The same week I started classes, we received a visit from the Minister of Education, who arrived at the courtyard in the same black Mercedes I had seen enter the Anexa the day of my expulsion. The courtyard filled with murmurs; the children, lined up like little soldiers, with me in the front row on account of my outstanding grades, applauded while he spoke of "education for all," a hollow slogan for children who only wanted to impress their teachers.

"So you're the top student at this school?" the minister asked me, before moving on without waiting for my answer.

My mother, from the back, winked at me, proud.

That night she told me she would be going on a trip representing the school, a three-day outing at the renowned, luxurious Club del Cañón Hotel, and that I, on account of my high grades from the previous year, would go with her.

"Aren't I taking another child's spot?" I said, wondering who would replace me at the Anexa.

"No!" my mother laughed, pleased by my honesty. "Your grades from last year have been accepted just like those of other children coming from other schools. And here, you're first in your class!"

I understood then the reasons behind her change in attitude, which up to that moment I had attributed to our vacation in Santa Marta.

That conversation put me at ease over those months, though my unease never fully faded, still fearful of future scoldings; I imagined the trip postponed, dissolved by my sweat-stained notebook, or by a door

that swung open and fell off its hinges, and being expelled again for vandalism.

One day Pepito told me I needed to come to his house to do a school assignment, since he'd already come to mine—an exchange my mother supervised like a peace treaty. My father drove me to the address he gave me and, horrified, saw that it was the house built under the highway bridge toward Lagos III, over the stream running alongside the school, a hundred meters up. The roar of cars was barely a hum beneath the bridge's concrete slabs, and the humid air gave off a fragrance of fresh grass and sawdust. Contrary to what one might expect, the wastewater ran with such force—purified as it crashed against hundreds of rocks—that the channel of La Calavera stream gave off no foul smell at all, but fresh country scents instead.

My father stopped the Jeep short, kicking up gravel on the embankment in front of the hanging wooden bridge leading to his house.

"Are you going to cross that bridge?" he said, his eyes fixed on the dwelling beneath the bridge.

"Why not?" I asked, seeing Pepito already waving at me from the window, a broad smile ignoring my father's worried expression.

David hesitated, looking at the improvised structure of brick and cardboard, reinforced with tattered tarps against the rain. In the seventies, shacks like that were the hidden face of Bucaramanga: settlements of migrants fleeing bipartisan violence in the countryside, where fifty percent of families earned less than minimum wage. For my father, with his

engineering semesters that had let him land a government post, it was an abyss.

"Just be careful not to fall into the stream," he sighed, resigned, unable to bring himself to hurt my little friend's feelings.

I crossed the bridge without trouble and entered Pepito's house, which, despite everything, kept a cleanliness and order that were almost touching. His parents had devised a system of double windows—cardboard and plastic—that muffled the highway's roar and the constant murmur of the stream.

"Your dad didn't want to come in, did he?" he said. But before I could make an excuse for him, he laughed, and, with a light gesture, led me to his bedroom window. From there unfolded a horizon of water, stones, and shrubs, a trembling landscape rising from the nearly straight channel of the stream up to the high mists of the mountain.

The interior was spacious and bright, its floor hand-polished cement, its walls whitewashed, decorated with faded Christmas calendars and family photographs in tin frames, which seemed to silently guard the house's entire history.

We did our homework at a wooden table made of leftover carpentry scraps, laughing at the drawings we scribbled in the margins: a plane from my album crashing into the stream. Despite the charm of the place—the warmth of his mother offering us panela water—I felt an invisible pressure, as though living under a bridge were a stigma Pepito and his family ignored, but which society reminded them of with every

pitying glance from the buses passing overhead. In Colombia, the urban precariousness of the seventies wasn't only material; it was a social apartheid, in which children like Pepito internalized the shame, and I, the visitor, absorbed it like a sponge.

"We're doing fine here," Pepito said, as though reading my mind, as we glued a flower sticker into the album. "The water's free, from the stream, and the noise lulls us to sleep."

But I knew something was wrong, the social pressure, not living like "normal people."

Leaving, my father drove in silence along the highway. Only once I got out of his Jeep did he say:

"We're going to enroll you next year at an all-boys school."

That remark stuck in my mind: would I then stop being Pepito's friend, just because he was one of "the lower ones"? At school, I told my friend what my father had said, and he only shrugged, saying there was an eternity to play between now and next year.

"And what if you or I die this year?" he joked, no doubt, I already sensed it then, alluding to friends and relatives his family had lost in the bloody conflicts that had displaced them from the country's interior.

"We're going to send you to another school!" began to be my father's stinging refrain at every dinner.

I stayed silent, unable to express my grief over my announced departure.

A television commercial announced, on January 1st, 1976, before our return to Bucaramanga, the Colombian launch of the weekly comic strip *Kalimán*, a

Mexican-Hindu hero whose adventures I listened to on the radio whenever I could, hidden under the sheets. My insistence on getting his comic book was so great that my father took us one night in mid-January downtown, in his Jeep Willys, rattling along streets lit by yellow streetlamps.

I vividly remember that moment, one of the happiest of my childhood; he parked by the illuminated Carrera 36, got out, and left my sister and me in the cab, both of us leaning out the window, watching him buy something—a newspaper, I thought—and suddenly, with a smile that surprised us, he handed us each a magazine: issues 1 and 2 of *Kalimán*, smelling of freshly printed ink, their covers busy with color, their pages black and white. Downtown Bucaramanga, where the middle class bought dreams at newsstands, those comic books were a balm against the family crisis. *Kalimán*'s first adventure was a mix of horror and noir fiction, a man murdered in London and a vampire hiding out in Yorkshire county. I didn't read that comic; I lived it. So, walking through the halls of the Anexa, and later across the dusty courtyard of the Rufino José Cuervo School, I no longer felt I was at school, but on the cold paths of foggy Yorkshire.

Eliseo's deafening screams were, to me, the same shrieks with which the Hunchback Yorvich tortured the delicate Roxana, locked in an underground cell, while I sat chained to a desk, condemned to fruitlessly fill, again and again, pages of calligraphy I could never execute with skill. Before sticking out my leg to trip Yorvich, I thought of how *Kalimán*, fed up

with that hunchback's abuses, had thrown him into the air as just punishment for his threats. And appearing humiliated before Teacher Remedios, I knew I wasn't confronting a human being, but the treacherous Yésica, a lady who, at the slightest provocation, would bare her deadly fangs, as she indeed did the day she uttered the word "expulsion." Those stories lent heroism to what I was living through, which, through the art and magic of imagination, was no longer suffering, but adventure.

Every Sunday at seven in the evening, punctual as clockwork, we went to Mass. I waited for it with the same eagerness I waited for the newsstand's magazines, because in the Gospels I found adventures no less hair-raising than those of *Kalimán* or *Tamakún*. If the comics had vampires and mummies, Father Fito's Gospel readings featured the hypocritical priests of the temple, the envious Pharisees, and a Herod who struck me as every bit as sinister as Count Bartok, *Kalimán*'s enemy. Jesus, on the other hand, was my hero: he confronted them all with words sharper than any sword, and came out unscathed, just like *Kalimán* infiltrating his rivals' lairs with only his mind as a weapon.

Father Fito—young, smiling, in a freshly ironed cassock—had the habit of greeting and hugging the children at the end of Mass. I always sought him out, convinced he was the visible representative of Jesus. He'd hold me tight, and I'd close my eyes, imagining I was receiving a bit of that holy strength capable of defeating Pharisees and vampire counts alike. But, sometimes, as he leaned in to give me the ritual kiss, I noticed his tongue brush against my ears. It was a

fleeting gesture that unsettled me and left me cold, as though a shadow dimmed the church's light. I never told anyone; in my mind, that brush was as unsettling a mystery as the villains in my comics, a puzzle I couldn't yet decipher.

At the Rufino José Cuervo School, comic-book stories became my secret refuge. I read and reread them furtively at recess, hidden behind the guava tree, while Pepito kept watch. A side conflict arose with Fidelia, a third-grade girl with sunken eyes, who demanded of me: "Give me a sticker or I'll tell Miss Sara you're reading trash." I handed them over without protest, since I already had plenty. In public-school courtyards, comics and stickers were contraband, an escape from reality. Sharing them with Pepito was my act of rebellion, one that was already drawing in extortionists.

A Sunday visit to my Aunt Chavela's house was the reason my cousins Mario and Jorge showed me their collection of *Tamakún* and *Blue Demon* comics, heroes who expanded the frame of what I then considered reality. It was there I learned of the feared skull-faced mummy Gazú, *Tamakún*'s nemesis, who whipped his enemies without mercy as they cried out, begging.

That, I believe, was the cause of my parents' unease and eventual animosity toward comic books when, toward mid-April, because of the incident with the four two-peso coins, I cried out to my father, sobbing, as he whipped me with his belt, that same plea for mercy from the comic.

"So now I'm a monster?" he roared, redoubling his blows, recognizing the scene from that very comic,

which he, through some perverse coincidence of fate, had also read.

When I asked my father to buy me more sticker packets, he told me I had to choose between the packets for that album or the weekly issues of *Kalimán*, which led me to immediately take back my request.

That choice was a microcosm of our deprivation: in the middle class of the seventies, entertainment was a rationed luxury, while in the poorer neighborhoods, children made do with oral stories or the radio.

The coin episode ended those months without confinement to my room; it may have been that the threat of losing his job and my mother's new work had kept them distracted, or it may have been that my daily behavior at Rufino José Cuervo, constantly supervised by my mother, had met their expectations and diluted the infamies of the Anexa. Or, more likely, I believe it was Christ, who comforted me in my room with His bleeding head, who granted me those six months of relative peace at home, marred only by the Monday beatings. For, though I had been whipped haphazardly by my parents, while also being tormented in class by the institutional bullying of my first school, my understanding had already rationalized the Monday beatings at Rufino José Cuervo as part of my normal life. For six days a week, peaceful coexistence with my parents and sister let me sleep soundly amid the storm, aware that the following Monday would bring its quota of violence, but precisely because of that certainty, able

to breathe. The predictability of the horror had become my life raft.

It was during my third semester of journalism at the Javeriana University that I came to illustrate that reality by applying Barthes's model of lexias to Julio Cortázar's story "Letter to a Young Lady in Paris." In it, a man suffers a recurring, grotesque anomaly: he vomits baby rabbits. But the extraordinary thing about the story isn't the monstrosity of the phenomenon, but its domestication. Just as I had in my childhood, Cortázar's protagonist had learned to live with the aberrant by turning it into routine. Each vomited rabbit was predictable, manageable, could be hidden in the closet of the borrowed apartment where he lived. Abnormality, through repetition, became normalized. The rabbits were my Monday beatings: horrible, painful, but tolerable precisely because they arrived with clockwork punctuality. I knew that on Sunday night I had to prepare myself psychologically, that on Monday, after the school day, the belt would come, and that on Tuesday I'd wake up again in the ordinary world where my parents spoke to me normally and my sister played with me. That structure, however perverse, gave me a frame of reference, an emotional geography in which to locate myself.

Cortázar's character manages to hold onto his sanity as long as he can control the number of rabbits, as long as he can hide them, as long as the frequency of the vomiting stays constant. I held onto mine as long as the beatings came exclusively on Mondays, as long as the rest of the week flowed with the illusion of family

harmony. But the story isn't about coexisting with the monstrous; it's about the collapse of that coexistence. The protagonist falls apart when the rabbits begin multiplying unpredictably, when the closet can no longer contain them, when the controlled abnormality turns into uncontrollable chaos. It is then, faced with the impossibility of maintaining the fiction of normalcy, that the character seeks "an end contrary to nature" and throws himself into the void, just as I would do, months later.

That was my experience, before and after 1976. At the Anexa, the beatings had been erratic, unpredictable: they could come any day, at any hour, for any reason, or for no reason at all. There was no emotional calendar to cling to. But in 1977, when disorder returned home after those six months of relative peace, when the beatings stopped being confined to Mondays and spread out again through the whole week with no discernible pattern, I lost that life raft that was predictability. Cortázar's rabbits multiplied uncontrollably in my own life: they were no longer only on Mondays, I could no longer hide the horror in the closet of my conscience for six days and then take it out, give it its ration of existence, and put it away again. The horror had taken over my entire space, every day, every corner of my mind.

The Barthesian analysis I carried out at the Javeriana allowed me to understand, retrospectively, why those six months of Monday-only beatings had been, paradoxically, the most bearable of my childhood. Like Cortázar's protagonist, I had developed a survival

system based on the ritualization of horror. But I also came to understand why the breaking of that rhythm had shattered me so completely: because when abnormality loses its structure, when you can no longer predict when the next rabbit will come, or when the next beating will land, reality itself fragments. There are no longer good days and bad days: only the perpetual anxiety of not knowing what's coming. And that uncertainty, I discovered thanks to Cortázar, is more maddening than the horror itself.

It so happened that Adelia gave Gabriela and me matching piggy banks, but while mine was an ordinary thin plastic pig, my sister's was green porcelain painted with tiny hand-painted flowers; her little pig was smaller, but far more charming. That detail, innocent in appearance, was a gender-based sub-conflict eating away at me: in the machista Colombia of the seventies, girls were "delicate," boys were "strong," and saving money was an unequal game. Whenever the doorbell rang announcing my father's arrival home, we had to run out to bring him a glass of lemonade and his leather slippers. We had barely sixty seconds, and heaven help whoever was slow about it.

"I'll teach him a lesson!" he'd say, taking off his belt against me, or grabbing a newspaper against my sister (he'd avoided using the belt on her ever since the buckle incident), whichever of us arrived too late. "When I was young, my brothers and sisters and I used to fight over who got to bring Papá his sandals or his lemonade! And there's only two of you!"

Generally, my mother assigned at the start of each week who was responsible for which task. When we got our piggy banks, my father took up the habit of giving us his loose change for our diligence. But then I complained about why he gave me a twenty-cent coin, and Gabriela one of the newly, exquisitely minted bronze two-peso coins.

"Because she's a girl!" was his answer, the same one he'd given me when I complained about why I mopped or swept, or why I washed the dishes as often as he ordered me to, while she never had to.

I said nothing in reply, but it saddened me to calculate that in two weeks I would do what she did in a single day. That, combined with my inability to buy more stickers—now that our allowance had to stretch to cover everything—led me to pick up my sister's little pig and weigh its coins, calculating how much money she had saved. One day I lay on my bed and, lifting the piggy bank, noticed a light plastic cap beneath its belly; examining it, curious to know its purpose, it gave way in my hands, bathing my face, like Scrooge McDuck's, in shining coins.

At first I panicked, thinking I'd broken it, but gradually I understood it wasn't a one-time-use piggy bank, like the plastic ones that had to be smashed open and thrown away, but a reusable one. Instead of breaking such lovely porcelain, its designers had devised a plug that could be opened and closed at will. So I put its entire contents back and sealed the little pig again, leaving it in my sister's toy chest.

The days passed, and I couldn't stop thinking about that secret no one else at home knew. Until, prodded by some demon—perhaps the same one that made me restless in class—I decided that if I took out just four little coins, neither my parents nor Gabriela would notice their absence. I opened it again, took out the coins, and put it back in its place, pleased with my feat. But now came the hard part: how, and when, would I buy the sticker packets? I thought about going to the neighborhood store, but then remembered I'd already once been accused of theft there, when in truth I'd only gone to mail a letter. I remembered there was a shop near the school, and that it was common for children to go in and out during recess, since many of them lived in houses near the school. So I took the four coins in my new satchel, a flat, gleaming plastic briefcase with a zipper, and got ready for another day of classes.

Recess was at 2:30 p.m., but before that I had two classes with Teacher Sara, first social studies, then math. I noticed that, since my seat was in the front row—by my mother's express orders—my satchel might tempt the children behind me to take the coins. So I decided to keep them in the pockets of my blue shorts. But those pockets were too small for such heavy coins, so, my hands sweating over such a delicate transaction with stolen money, I decided to stack them between my legs. The math class went on, and Teacher Sara had just begun talking about savings kept in banks.

I raised my hand, as had already become my habit.

"How can we save if we're not given any money?" I asked, naively, my voice an echo of Pepito's complaints about his family.

Teacher Sara raised her face suspiciously, and, fixing her eyes between my legs, asked:

"If you're not given money," her voice sharp as a whip, "where did you get those coins?"

I went pale with horror. How could I have been so naïve! She knew I only received a thirty-cent allowance, and that I always bought myself a snack.

"We're going to go talk to your mother right now!" Her stern face drew a gasp from my classmates. I stood frozen until Sara took me by the arm and led me to another trial for my behavior. I had no choice but to confess what had happened, listen to my mother's shouts, and wait, trembling, for my father's beating that night.

When he came in, I handed him his slippers and was already walking away when my mother grabbed me by the sideburns.

My heartbroken cries for mercy ended with a total ban on my sticker albums and comics, as well as a ban on going out to play with my little friends in the neighborhood for the rest of the semester.

I cried in my room as I never had before, certain that I now had nothing and no one left in this life.

"Yes!" I said to the figure of Christ hanging on the wall. "You are King in another life! Take me with you! I don't want to live!"

My screams reignited my parents' anger, and they came back, this time with an electrical cord, to whip me "for scandalizing the neighbors."

"That way he'll learn not to steal again…" was their fearsome, irrefutable verdict.

For the first time, I took the beating in silence, biting my lips, having already learned from the victims that the wicked mummy Gazú whipped for far lesser reasons, since, yes, I was nothing but a vile thief.

That night I had my first nightmare in a series that foretold my fall from the truck in May 1977.

I was walking down a street leading to the Benjamín García Cadena Viaduct, the wide, endless highway bridge. The street was deserted, but on both sides stood the desks of the Rufino José Cuervo School, empty, their lids raised like open jaws. From inside each desk emerged a child's arm holding a shiny, tempting sticker. I knew I shouldn't take them, but my feet kept moving toward the bridge, unable to stop.

Reaching the viaduct, I discovered its railings were made of braided electrical cables. I had to cross it. There was no other choice. The world began swaying from side to side, as though the bridge were a giant pendulum suspended over the abyss. I kept slipping, trying to grab the cables, but they electrocuted my hands like living snakes, leaving burning marks on my palms.

At the exact center of the bridge, where the height was most dizzying, stood Teacher Sara, and her voice was the voice of every teacher who had ever corrected me. She held something out to me. At first I

thought it was my sticker album, but as I got closer I saw it was my shameful notebook. Then I felt thorns piercing my skull.

"Accept my crown," Jesus comforted me from the clouds. "I already suffered for you."

I reached out my hand, but then the bridge began to tilt. It no longer swayed: it bent like a branch about to snap. The cable railings began breaking, one by one, falling into the void with a sharp whistle.

I suffered the vertigo of my fall, seeing beside me my sticker album opening and closing like a wounded bird; my *Kalimán* comics disintegrating into loose pages spiraling away; my father's slippers striking me before continuing on their course.

I screamed in desperation, until I saw my name printed on the front page the next day, just as my grandfather Jonás's death had once been published.

The newspapers *La Crónica*, *Diario del Oriente*, and *Flanco Conservador* all repeated the same headline in letters the size of buildings:

BOY WITH A TWO IN CONDUCT THROWS HIMSELF FROM THE VIADUCT

I woke up drenched in sweat, the electrical cord coiled at the foot of my bed, where my father had left it after the beating, like a reminder, like a threat, like a promise that Mondays could come any day of the week.

Chapter 9. Three Hundred Poor Children at the Club del Cañón

The Celebration of the Best burst into Bucaramanga like a bolt of lightning in late April 1976, a flash of a new era brightening the mist the city woke to each morning, as though the mountains watching over it from the clouds held their breath before the promise of the kingdom of heaven established on earth. The Ministry of Education had decreed that three hundred public-school children—the most outstanding in grades and conduct—deserved a respite at the Club del Cañón Hotel, a stronghold of the Santander elite where the humble, or members of the middle class, like me, Marco, seven years old, only ever entered as guests, or as servants, decorating events or installing windows under the haughty gaze of the provincial millionaires.

Only once, years later, when Uncle David traveled from Cali to visit Aunt Rosa, did we enter its grounds as guests. Then we witnessed my father's discomfort, as he had to endure his former bosses from the land registry office coming up to greet him with that same mocking question:

"And you, what are you doing here?"

To me, that trip was a belated redemption after my expulsion from the Anexa, where a two in conduct had marked me as a pariah for my chronic restlessness—anchored to a desk by a system incapable of stoking the flames of my curiosity with the ashes of

its calligraphy pages, its chalk on the board, and its recess confinements.

The months at Rufino José Cuervo, with its exposed-brick classrooms and rules as rigid as the Anexa's, had been a trial by fire, but my flawless grades in math and language earned me a spot among the children promised to "become something in life." My mother, Adelia, now a teacher at the school after years at the Normal, was selected as chaperone, a pride she carried with the severity of someone who knows humility forgives no mistakes. At home, however, the news of the trip set off a conflict revealing the invisible cracks in our family, an echo of the tensions in *Kalimán* or *Tamakún*, where loyalty is tested on shifting sands, and justice, as in the Old Testament, favors those who appeal to divine protection.

The trouble erupted the morning before the trip, over breakfast, arepas with cheese in our spacious living room, at a newly bought Formica dining set, the morning's heat already dispersing the mist that fell over Bucaramanga's hills at dawn. My younger sister, Gabriela, six years old, threw a monumental tantrum. Her school, La Misericordia, run by strict nuns in starched habits that smelled of incense and eternal discipline, hadn't been invited to the event.

"It's not fair! I'm good in class too!" she shouted, her small fists pounding the Formica table until my father's plate trembled, the arepas hopping like dreams fleeing her childish rage.

Tears rolled down her rosy cheeks, and I watched her with a mix of pity and secret relief: for

once, the prize was mine, not hers, a ray of light in my childhood of punishments and rules that crushed my restlessness like a boot on an ant.

My father, David, sitting with *La Crónica* open in his hands—headlines about the stagflation caused by OPEC's oil embargo—sighed deeply before stepping in. His voice, a rough balm forged on distant assignments and in villages reached only by mule trails, belonged to a man who had learned to assess taxes among residents forever irritated at watching the national treasury devoured by a bureaucracy that left no funds to pave their dusty roads.

"Gabriela, sweetheart, your school is private," he explained, with that calm that hid the exhaustion of a man who knew the world rewarded appearance and was indifferent to merit. "The Capuchin Tertiary Sisters at La Misericordia are the best teachers in Bucaramanga, all with degrees in pedagogy and theology, diplomas that gleam like trophies on their desks. We've put our greatest educational investment into you, because you're the girl of the house, the one who must rise without stumbling, the one who'll carry our name into a future of roses. Marco has to make do with public school teachers, and few of them have even completed university studies, while you have teachers with certificates from the Pontifical Javeriana University, preparing you for a world we will never see."

His words fell like a bucket of cold water, freezing the bite of arepa halfway to my mouth. I, chewing in silence, looked up, my heart pounding like a drum of doubt in my seven-year-old chest. Was that

true? My mother, Adelia, was my teacher at Rufino José Cuervo, and though she hadn't finished university—she'd studied at the Normal, like so many teachers of that era, in classrooms polished with mud, chalk, and cement—she was the strictest and most dedicated, the one who pulled my sideburns with a love forged in white-hot iron, correcting my notebooks with a firm hand so I wouldn't repeat the spelling mistakes she herself had overcome through the blows of a ruler, her own father's head-thumps, and sleepless nights.

"And Mamá isn't educated, then? She's a teacher at my school," I asked naively, my voice a thread of curiosity that didn't weigh the consequences, like Solín in *Kalimán*, always poking his nose where it didn't belong and stirring up storms with his recklessness.

The silence that followed was deafening, a void filled by the tick-tock of the wall clock, marking the pulse of my mistake.

"What do you make of such a rude son?" my mother asked.

My father frowned, his eyes hardening like the steel of his belt, and my mother let her spoon fall with a metallic clatter that rang out like a verdict in some invisible trial.

"How dare you question!" my father exploded, unbuckling his belt with a motion I already knew too well, the leather creaking like a snake ready to strike. "That's insolence, a challenge to the authority God placed over you!"

This time the punishment was light, but it set the stage for it to become more frequent from then on. The

blows fell fast, three to the buttocks that burned like purifying fire, and I bit my lip so as not to scream, remembering the lessons of Gazú the mummy's victims. Gabriela, seeing my contorted face, calmed at once, her sobs turning into stifled hiccups, a tacit pact of silence that quieted her own complaint. The kitchen air thickened with the smell of toasted arepa and unshed tears, a dispute underscoring the invisible inequalities of our home: she, the favored one with an elite education, protected like a jewel in a reliquary of nuns and prayers; I, the rough-hewn boy paying, with his own body, the rules of the seventies' machista world, where girls were "helpless" and boys were forged on the anvil of premature responsibility.

In the Colombia of 1976, families like ours prioritized their daughters' education at religious schools to "protect" them from streets full of dangers, or, as my Nonita Kuki used to say, "so they wouldn't have to cook like she did," while boys like me were thrown into the public system, a crucible of poverty where discipline was the only free luxury, and curiosity a mortal sin paid for with physical punishment, social ostracism, and the guilt of not fitting into a world demanding blind obedience.

But the harshest blow wasn't mine; it was my father's. Right after my expulsion from the Anexa, as though fate were weaving a cruel parallel, David was fired from his job at the land registry office. He, rated the best supervisor of field assignments, a man who drew up reports with a Swiss watchmaker's precision, plotting boundary lines on maps that looked like works

of art in a country where land was contested with bribes and threats, was dismissed through a declaration of redundancy, his position eliminated as though it had never existed.

It happened two weeks after my expulsion. In his last meeting with his boss, engineer Paco—a man with a grey moustache and a lively gaze, a legacy of his glory days as a basketball player on the departmental team—the truth surfaced like a corpse thrown into the depths of the sea, returned to shore by the waves.

"Understand, David," Paco told him, leaning over a desk covered in crumpled maps, his voice low as though he feared the walls were listening, "the union demanded your head as one of their conditions to avoid a general strike. We had to give in. Being a good worker isn't enough. Being too honest, like you, draws enemies in a country where everyone's trying to embezzle the State however they can, eliminating anyone who gets in the way."

The words echoed in my father like a mirror of my own expulsion, a mirror of my own fall: I, punished for my restlessness that exposed the broken rules of the Anexa; he, for his rectitude, which also defied the endemic corruption of the Colombia of the seventies, where bribes were common currency and clean hands an unforgivable crime.

In a country where corruption was an art practiced from ministry desks down to the dusty corners of squatter settlements, and honesty a crime paid for with professional exile, our social banishment was a punishment for refusing to bend to the system's

crooked rules. That firing turned our home into a field of tension, where every glass we broke became an irresponsible act against our own survival.

Around that time, Don Yesid moved into the house across the street, a bus driver married to Antonieta, a woman as sturdy as he was. They had an older daughter, Diva, who wore tall patent-leather boots like Aunts Lucía, Jazmín, and Lila, and three boys: Marlon, ten, and twin boys my age, Benito and Benedicto. All of them redheaded and freckled.

I went out to greet them at my mother's urging, and they invited me in to play at their father's bus. I certainly saw them go in through the door and duck under the fare register, but I, who always rode buses with my mother, went in the way I usually did, working the register's lever handle, adding a digit to its counter. The twins immediately protested and ran to complain to Don Yesid.

My father assumed his neighbor had come to show him friendship, but what he found was a furious man demanding payment for the fare his son had irresponsibly rung up.

My father, with that calm with which he settled fatal feuds in Santander's roughest hamlets, told him there was no reason to get upset, that if it were true, he'd pay him. Then he called me over, frightened as I was in the garden, hands pressed over my lips.

"Is it true you got on the bus and rang up a fare?"

"I didn't know that…"

"Is it true or not?" My father raised his voice.

"Yes…" I said, afraid he'd unleash his anger on me.

"My apologies, Don…"

"Yesid. Yesid Contreras, at your service."

"Here you go," my father said, handing him a two-peso bill.

Don Yesid smiled and handed him eighty cents in change he'd already prepared.

My father dismissed him cordially. As soon as we went in, he told me he hoped "the Matchstick Heads" wouldn't be trouble. I told him I didn't know how buses worked, and he just made an impatient gesture, letting me know he wasn't in the mood to hear excuses.

I laughed then at how fitting the nickname was, since the color of their hair was truly fiery, quite different from the redheads of European descent one saw in movies. I would later mention the nickname to Sergio and Abhad, and it would mark them for the rest of their lives.

My mother argued with my father over dinner, since if she wouldn't tolerate an insult at home, she certainly wouldn't stand for our neighbors being denigrated. And I had to listen to her scolding for having wasted a peso twenty that way.

She was reminding me, in effect, that mistakes were luxuries we could no longer afford.

My mother questioned my father about what work he would take on now that he was unemployed. Unruffled, he opened the Bible to the First Book of Samuel, chapter 17, and read aloud the passage in which

the young David, with neither armor nor sword, faces the Philistine giant Goliath armed only with a sling and five stones from the brook.

David said to the Philistine, "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied." (NIV)

With a single stone, David brought down the giant who had terrorized the army of Israel.

My father closed the Bible calmly and drew the parallel with the serenity of a man who had come to understand his own destiny.

"I am that David," he said, "and my Goliath is unemployment—that corrupt giant that stands against honorable men who lack influence in this country.

"Everyone in Colombia is afraid to face him, because they know that if they fail, they lose their severance pay, that last stone of defense the State grants them, and are left destitute. But I, like the shepherd boy of Bethlehem, will not shrink from his challenge. I will risk my life, my reputation, and my savings, entrusting myself to God, just as David did.

"For I, too, am a child of God, and I can trust in Him with the same certainty as that anointed king. Then as now, few truly believe in His omnipresence and in His protection over those who risk their lives under His shelter.

"The stones in my sling will be my integrity, my hard work, and my trust in Divine Providence. And just

as David cut off the giant's head with the Philistine's own sword, I will defeat the hydra of want with the very strengths my enemies tried to destroy: my experience, my reputation, and an example that my children and friends will honor for generations to come."

Days later, at a family gathering at Aunt Eustaquia's house, my mother was questioned in the kitchen, while they prepared some snacks.

"And now," Aunt Eustaquia asked, "what are you going to live on? Your salary as a teacher isn't enough, Adelia."

"God will provide," was her testimony of faith.

Did anyone doubt her words? Does anyone doubt them now? Certainly, to someone who doesn't believe in God, her phrase is meaningless, but not to someone who believes, and who has placed his trust in the benevolence of fate. Because if God and the good are one and the same, whoever does good is God, just as the Romans discovered when they worshipped Fortune as their goddess. That's why my mother's phrase has since been better translated for the agnostic ear as:

"The Universe will provide."

Only many years later, standing before the Creator, would I come to understand that in that very rectitude lay the source of a happy life, which, though it granted no riches, secured what was indispensable: good health, and peace of mind.

On the first day of the Celebration, the Ministry's white buses arrived at Rufino José Cuervo like spaceships landing in a dusty neighborhood, their

engines roaring promises of escape that echoed through the alleys where children played with leather balls. My mother lined me up with the other fourteen selected children—including Pepito, my faithful desk-mate, his curly hair and eternal freckles dancing like stars in his mischievous laugh—all in uniforms ironed by force by mothers bent over wooden boards, their calloused hands marked by the work of washing other people's clothes or selling tamales on the corners.

Our faces reflected a contained excitement, bright eyes hiding dreams postponed by hardship, and I felt a knot in my stomach: it was my first outing without my mother's constant supervision, or the shadow of my father's belt, a breath of relief from the rules that bound me like invisible chains forged in the furnace of poverty. The yellow-dirt courtyard buzzed with parents seeing off their children with hurried hugs, rough hands that smelled of brick, coal, or coffee, and relatives hiding tears behind forced smiles—knowing this trip was a luxury they couldn't give their children themselves.

The trip to the Club del Cañón was a noisy party: "El Preso" by Fruko y sus Tesos blared against the bus's fogged-up windows, children singing at the top of their lungs, cracking jokes about strict teachers who pulled sideburns—knowing glances aimed at my mother, who smiled with wounded pride, her teacher's skirt carefully ironed to hide our hardship—and curious eyes glued to the windows as we passed humble neighborhoods with rusted zinc roofs, noisy highways where the Cañaveral bridge rose, its columns announcing the entrance to

paradise, its gleaming railings mute witnesses to Bucaramanga's progress amid economic uncertainty.

The song playing carried a plaintive refrain about troubles reaching only God's ears.

Ay, ay, ay,
Dios,
solo a Ti llegan mis quejas.

Finally, we arrived at the green hills surrounding the hotel, the bastion of Bucaramanga's aristocracy that, for three weekdays, opened its doors to us out of ministerial whim, a gesture that smelled more of political charity than structural solution.

We arrived at noon, and the luxury struck us, an unexpected wave of order and privilege. The building was a palace of red brick with white towers rising like fairy-tale castles, surrounded by freshly trimmed gardens with fountains bubbling crystalline water beneath Santander's relentless sun, a sun that in the poorer neighborhoods burned our skin without mercy, leaving scabs that itched like memories of an eternal summer.

The pools gleamed like tempting blue mirrors, and the air smelled of fresh chlorine mixed with the perfume of exotic flowers—jasmine, orchids, bougainvillea—that I had never seen so exquisite in Bucaramanga's leafy hills, where plants struggled to grow amid nettles and burrs, prematurely withered like the skin of the old men who begged in the plaza. For three hundred public-school children—many from neighborhoods like Lagos III, where aqueduct water

often ran scarce and had to be drawn from nearby wells or distant streams flowing down from the Santísimo hills—this was the promised paradise: a temporary oasis contrasting with the daily reality of my classmates, resigned to raw-brick classrooms, blackboards cracked by time, and five-cent allowances that evaporated into a single serving of *papas chorreadas*, the offering of their mothers' sacrifice.

Humberto Bustamante, the Ministry coordinator, welcomed us at the entrance with an ear-to-ear smile, handing out plastic wristbands with numbers to identify the "champions," as though we were cattle branded for an uncertain fate. A tall, young man, with a thin moustache trimmed like a scythe, sunken eyes that looked like wells of secrets, and an immaculate olive-green suit lending him the air of a sinister official, Humberto didn't walk, he glided, like a shadow floating with stealth.

"Welcome, champions of Santander," he said, in a soft voice hiding an edge, and in that instant, I had a strange premonition that reminded me of Doctor Shadow from *Blue Demon*, in *The Kidnappers' Adventure*: not a bureaucrat, but a big-city crook, a filthy man from the underworld who snatched unsuspecting children off the crowded streets of Mexico City, gouging out their eyes and cutting off their hands until their crying convinced passersby to drop a coin, exploiting them as beggars on corners where destitution overruled dignity.

That's why I avoided him all day: I slipped behind Pepito, pretending to tie my shoes, which felt

ready to burst on my feet from how tight they'd become.

"Marco needs new shoes," my mother had told my father before we left.

"But the ones he has are practically new!"

"He's growing…"

"Then let's wait until he wears them out."

That my feet were compressed under the fabric didn't bother me, since no one noticed; what did embarrass me was that my shirts were already too small, letting others see my belly button.

That very week, my father got out of his Jeep with a photographer and asked Chinita and me to pose for a photo. When I saw it, I nearly cried, noticing my discomfort captured in that image, one of the few I still have from 1976.

Already having slipped away, I stuck close to my mother in the lobby, her teacher's skirt a shield against Humberto's gaze. When she sent me back to my group, I hid behind Rosa, a girl with unraveled braids falling like vines, while Humberto handed out cold juices in butter-paper cups that smelled of artificial lemon, my heart pounding alert at his presence.

In the lobby of polished marble, where the echo of our tight or mended shoes rang out like intruders in a temple, I saw faces that chilled me: Eliseo, the Anexa informant whose deafening voice had made him my nemesis, now wearing an expression of frozen resentment; Kikito, the spoiled one, in his immaculate uniform and cheap cologne bought at the market; Eugenia, the girl with the charming laugh who looked

as though she had stepped off the cover of Cosmopolitan; and Débora, the teacher who had drained my honor with those fangs of Yésica the vampire, now a chaperone with a folder under her arm, her gaze sharp as the scissors that had cut off my hopes.

Their expressions shifted from surprise to a barely disguised anger, a bewilderment that hung in the air like an evil omen.

Eliseo looked at me with narrowed eyes, his mouth twisted; Kikito hissed:

"So they sent you to study with the kids from La Calavera stream. Don't you miss our school?"

Eugenia added, in a sickly-sweet voice:

"Our parents paid a fee so poor kids like you could come."

I knew her words were a lie, but, since I still had a crush on her, I felt them like daggers sinking into my chest: evidence of the discrimination of the Colombia of the seventies, where the "decent" middle class—with schools attached to teacher-training colleges and dreams of private universities—looked down on those from public schools in neighborhoods like Lagos III, where need and lack of influence were a stigma that clung like the dust of the yellow earth.

They split us into groups of sixty students; depending on level, we rotated through the club's facilities, and within each group two factions formed: those from the plateau, with white-painted classrooms and polished shoes, against those from the ravine, like Rufino José Cuervo, where the smell of *papas chorreadas* stew dissolved into the fresh air of the stream. It was

like *Kalimán*, in the 1976 Vampire Adventure, where a battered community comes together in the end against a common evil, or like *Tamakún*, where the avenger unites the humble against mummies enslaving them, an anachronistic vision of ancient Egypt. Pepito and I joined a core group of thin children, with accents of rural migration carrying echoes of the fields of Boyacá or the eastern plains: Tito, always hungry; Rosa, with green, Teutonic eyes—a founding stock of Santander—and golden braids falling like vines, with perfect teeth that shone with a quiet defiance. Our looks said: we are more than your insults.

Rivalries soon arose among the second-grade students, bringing to light the pettiness inherited from our colonizing ancestors, with the greedy treacherously destroying the naïve who trusted their obsequious manners.

In the back garden, they organized a soccer match played with an official FIFA ball that rolled just like in the Colombian national team's matches:

"You only ever see these FIFA balls on television," Kikito said, his voice loaded with arrogance.

"Well, I've got four of those balls," Pepito said, kicking it toward the goal.

Kikito, plainly rattled by that remark, put his hand on the ball, drawing a penalty against his own team.

Pepito scored the goal, and soon after, Eliseo and Kikito were rolling on the ground, hitting each other with such fury that two teachers had to step in to separate them.

Two boys from the San José de la Salle Institute each scored a goal, putting us at a disadvantage.

Pepito, a master of marbles with legs forged in treacherous streams, appointed himself captain and gave us instructions; I, my restlessness channeled into erratic runs, dribbled past Eliseo, who stumbled clumsily, his choked cry like that of the Hunchback Yorvich from *Kalimán*, once again thrown through the air for his insults, falling into a well of humiliation. We won 3-2, with two goals of mine that we celebrated like a biblical victory, like Joshua's against the inhabitants of Canaan, a reminder that the world's weak—like us, the exiled and the humble—could triumph over giants.

At the pool, another battle: a swimming race in which Eugenia swam with a grace learned in private lessons at the plaster pools of the La Aurora neighborhood, her strokes as elegant as an elite mermaid's. But I, used to splashing in the rocky waters of Charalá's streams, where my parents often took me in my early childhood, and Pepito, skilled in the little river running alongside Rufino José Cuervo—where the páramo's water lulled our broken dreams among stones and mud—lost by a hair, surfacing with a cry of defeat that echoed off the white towers and drew nervous laughter from the lifeguards.

"Marco fell for her because she was his girlfriend!" Tito, our chubby ally, teased, and Eugenia blushed like a tomato, surely from anger, but read by most as a blush of love.

The suburban children burst into laughter that erased the stigma of their scorn forever.

Even so, there was an inner unease within that alliance, the certainty that I didn't truly belong to the periphery, that my parents weren't so helpless, and that I was there with them, exiled by an injustice similar to the one *Tamakún* suffered at the hands of the wicked cousin who murders his parents.

By the end of the day, Pepito and I beat the Normal's high-society kids in a mixed relay around the central fountain, where their arrogance cost them their footing: Eliseo slipped on the marble edge, falling flat on his stomach with a crash that flattened his perfectly curled blond ringlets, and drew ironic applause from the whole garden.

Humberto watched from a distance, his smile crooked, his gaze drifting toward me with a strange gleam, as though I were the intruder who didn't fit into his agenda.

The first day held workshops promising playful education, but for a curious boy like me, they were a test of containment, a ring where my energy clashed with invisible rules. In the reading room, a space with dark wooden shelves and plush rugs muffling our steps like sins, Miss Paulina—a slender teacher with round glasses reflecting stories like mirrors—read us fragments of *One Thousand and One Nights*, Scheherazade weaving adventures to postpone her death, and a fisherman who, in an act of kindness, freed a wicked genie. I got lost in the second adventure, imagining flying carpets crossing the sky over Bucaramanga, escaping the earthly rules binding me like chains of failed calligraphy. Because, as I'd already noticed, at Rufino José Cuervo I had no

calligraphy or geometric drawing classes. And our teachers checked the cleanliness or neatness of our class notebooks less and less often.

Compared to *Kalimán*, whose powerful mind defeated the vampires of an English valley—fighting demons and carnivorous plants—I felt like him and Solín at once, his young companion, learning to navigate mysteries with a curiosity that could always count on *Kalimán*'s providential help.

The mischief couldn't be avoided, and it came during the art workshop on the terrace overlooking the golf course, on Formica tables, with canvases and cases of multicolored creams that smelled of promises: Tito, cheeks rosy as raspberries, flung red cream onto Rosa's drawing, a princess with a crown of stars and dreamy eyes.

"You ruined my princess!" Rosa shouted, her green eyes filling with tears that splattered the paper, throwing a paintbrush at him that left a green streak on his sleeve.

Tito, in self-defense and with the clumsiness of someone distracted by thoughts of pastries, threw a sponge soaked in sky-blue oil paint at her, and soon the room was a colorful battlefield: magentas, blues, and yellows flying like projectiles in a free-for-all, children laughing and shouting while the teachers rushed to separate them, skirts billowing. My mother gave me a warning look, her bulging eyes those of a teacher who knew any misstep could cost me another punishment. I, unable to stay still, dodged a splash of yellow that stained my shorts, turning myself into a living canvas of

rebellion. Humberto stepped in with unexpected calm, cleaning up the mess with white towels smelling of luxury, laughing with a rattling complicity that chilled the air conditioning.

"This is abstract art, children. Well done!" he said, and his eyes drifted toward Eliseo, who drew alone in a corner, biting his lower lip with his chipped tooth until a drop of red blood stained his blank page, an ominous sign of what was to come.

The afternoon brought cooperative games in the garden, where the grass felt like a forbidden carpet under my bare feet, used to the scorching asphalt of Lagos III's streets.

In the sack races, Pepito and I lost, because of my constant glances toward the stands, where Humberto chatted with Eliseo as though they were old friends. My distraction gave those from the plateau enough of an advantage. Kikito raised his victorious hands, panting, right as I crossed the finish line.

In a "trust me" game, we covered our eyes with perfumed handkerchiefs and followed our classmates' voices; Eliseo tripped on an exposed root, falling flat on the damp grass, and we all laughed until Humberto lifted him up, whispering something in his ear that left him pale. His eyes turned evasive, as though hiding a secret that exhaled danger.

The first dinner was in the main dining room, a hall with crystal chandeliers that tinkled like chains: lacquered duck with herbs that crackled in the mouth like the bones of defeated villains, saffron-yellow rice like the gold of Egyptian tombs, and a flan dessert that

melted softly on the tongue, a luxury that contrasted with our usual lunches of meat, soup, and rice.

Then came stories around a bonfire in the garden, where the flames danced like avenging spirits. Miss Paulina told coastal ghost stories, wandering souls seeking redemption in forgotten mangroves. When it was Humberto's turn, he told a dark tale: that of a boy who disappeared in a river for disobeying his elders, whose body was found weeks later, bloated like a pufferfish dragged along by treacherous currents. Some of us children screamed in terror, hugging each other in the dim light, but Eliseo smiled scornfully.

"I don't believe you!" he dared to exclaim.

"I have his head right here."

Then he showed us his keychain: a shrunken head, eyeless, its white teeth gleaming like fangs jutting from its sewn-shut lips.

Eliseo screamed and ran off in terror, just like the rest of us, each of us recognizing a head shrunk by the wicked Jívaro headhunters of the Amazon, a recurring horror from animated comics.

It so happened that my father occasionally visited Eva, his distant cousin: a woman with curly hair and tortoiseshell glasses with thick, bottle-bottom lenses, always dressed in a neat medical apron that lent a professional air to her trade. She owned and ran the Evita pharmacy, on Carrera 33, across from San Pío park.

Papá always took me along with my mother, to my delight, since he knew that the moment I arrived, I'd throw myself at the comic-book shelf to devour

whatever was on display. His visits lasted between half an hour and an hour, though sometimes they stretched to two; only now do I understand he did it to make up for his other restrictions, which back then owed more to financial trouble than a lack of goodwill. It was there I read a *Dr. Mortis* comic I've never seen in print since. Maybe I dreamed it. In it, shipwreck survivors reach an island where they find the remains of a barbecue. Only after devouring it do they realize it's a barbecue of human bodies. And just as the horror seemed to have finished shaking me, Jívaro tribesmen appeared, capturing and devouring them alive, then shrinking their heads and hanging them from their bulging necklaces.

That night I lived through that macabre story in my own flesh, and weeks later its memory persisted in the fixed eyes of the head dangling by its hair from Humberto Bustamante's hand.

Some teachers complained to Humberto for scaring us, but he, laughing, said it was only a plastic head, and that he'd done it because it was already time for us to go to bed.

"Aren't you scared of that man?" I asked Eliseo minutes later, in the hallway toward the rooms, when we crossed paths face to face.

Eliseo hesitated for an instant, surprised by my sudden concern.

"He reminds me of another man who wants to hurt us…" I told him, thinking of Matías; and, adding a justification to his awkward silence, I went on: "and of Doctor Mortis. Have you read his comics?"

"You and your stories, always!" Eliseo said, flashing a scornful smile, the same one I would recognize decades later in Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*.

There, Death is not the villain, but the fanatics and cowardly "pious" men. In the midst of the plague, the knight Antonius Block plays chess with Death while his squire, Jöns, unmasks Raval, a thieving theologian he finally brands on the face for trying to assault a young virgin. Eliseo's laugh reflected that same true villainy: the cruelty of institutional representatives, empowered to abuse the weak—Humberto over Eliseo; Eliseo over me.

He made a gesture of superiority and walked off, while I reproached myself, repeating the proverb my father used to quote from my great-great-grandfather Marcelino: something to the effect that flattery always finds its reward, which in plain speech translates to: don't offer advice to those who haven't asked for it, or you'll be humiliated for your trouble.

For the first time, we slept on mattresses and down sheets, with air conditioning. The moment they left us alone, we waged a pillow fight full of laughter, until one pillow burst its seams and scattered feathers everywhere. Fortunately, we gathered them up and stuffed them back in before our chaperone returned.

We weren't the only ones; before bed, Miss Paulina came by to remind us we had to take care of the hotel's property as though it were our own.

The second day dawned with a radiant sun filtering through the curtains of my room, shared with Pepito and two other boys, the air thick with promise

and dispelled fears. We had breakfast: fluffy pancakes with golden honey dripping like a hero's elixir, and fresh orange juice that stung the throat like a stolen victory. We set off by bus to Lagos del Cacique Park, the trip noisy with Fruko songs blasting from the driver's radio, a popular hit playing, a hymn to freedom that dissolved, in jumps and spiraling twirls, my punishments at home and Humberto's invisible chains—a tune with a playful refrain about raindrops falling.

In the garden, we walked along smooth stone paths beside a lake, among giant orchids hanging like stolen jewels, and howler monkeys in cages screaming like Eliseo in his hysterical accusations. Pepito and I slipped off to a shaded corner to throw stones at the water lilies, laughing when a fish leapt, begging us to toss it bread crumbs, a moment of freedom that reminded me of *Centella*'s escapades on his motorcycle, who, in his 1976 television episodes, faced off every Friday at four in the afternoon against a wicked scientist on the highways of Tokyo.

Centella, in his white ninja-style suit, snow-white boots, a mother-of-pearl cape with a red silk lining, and a magnificent helmet bearing a crescent moon on the forehead that he only unleashed at moments of greatest peril, survived thanks to his friendship with loyal companions, the greatest weapon against injustice. A whip that destroyed infiltrated traitors, who in the end always found themselves betrayed by the very scientist who had manipulated them.

But the suspense grew like a poisonous vine when Humberto pulled Eliseo aside for a "special

workshop." That's when the whispering started, that Eliseo was his favorite. I heard Eugenia complain to Débora about being overlooked.

I watched Eliseo walk off with Humberto toward a secluded pavilion, flanked by palm trees that looked like climbing vines, the boy glancing back with frightened eyes, as though sensing some dark fate. Hours later, Eliseo returned pale, saying he'd been playing hide-and-seek, but his voice trembled like a leaf in a storm, and he avoided my eyes.

At lunch—fresh salad with crunchy candied leaves and thick medallions of roast meat oozing juices and fat—an accident shook the group: a boy from our side, José, a thin kid from the Dámaso Zapata Technical Educational Institution, nearly drowned in the pool during an out-of-control splashing game, his body floating limp like a doll until a lifeguard from the club pulled him out, coughing up chlorinated water.

Panic spread like ants swarming, mothers screaming and children clinging to the railings, but Humberto joked with a dark humor that chilled our blood:

"We almost had a funeral to top things off, burying the bravest boy!" he laughed macabrely, and we all answered with nervous laughter hiding our trembling, while his eyes shone like those of Satan's Claw, another enemy of *Centella*, who whipped his slaves for the sheer pleasure of watching them suffer.

The afternoon was spent on board games in the air-conditioned lounge: dominoes with tiles heavy as sentences, and cards shuffled like fates. We played

Concentration with six English decks the club provided, and our team won by matching pairs of cards, receiving a chocolate medal we slowly let melt in our mouths, savoring the forbidden sweetness.

Eliseo played little, watching Humberto with what I sensed was a growing fear, perhaps sensing the grim fate awaiting him for not having heeded my warning.

The third day, the cultural evening was the climax, an improvised theater in the auditorium with dim lights casting shadows like wrestlers' masks, and velvet chairs creaking under anxious weight. We performed with our nerves on edge: I recited Rubén Darío's "Lo fatal," about the inevitability of death lurking in every shadow, my voice trembling but steady, like a witness in a trial of life or death, its closing lines declaring that there is no greater sorrow than the sorrow of being alive, no heavier burden than conscious life itself.

Then came the dance contest. Since the Club del Cañón's members were then listening to Boney M songs, freshly imported from Germany, Pepito chose one of their hits and improvised a dance with invented moves imitating *El Santo*'s wrestling holds, drawing affectionate laughter that united both sides for a moment. Eliseo was absent, his seat empty as in an episode of *Los Robachicos*, an absence the rotating disco ball lit up with colored lights reflected in his glasses like tiny ghosts.

Then came the farewell bonfire, where we all joined hands and sang *We'll Meet Again*.

Kikito asked about Eliseo, and Miss Paulina told him Humberto had gone out with him "to talk about something special." She could just as easily have told him I'd seen them heading toward the golf course, where the fifth graders had their own bonfire, his hand on the boy's shoulder like a vulture's claw.

Débora, sitting nearby with her crumpled folder, got a call on the hotel phone: her daughter had been struck by a car on the city's wet streets, an accident that sent her running out with stifled sobs. We didn't see her again for the rest of that trip, though by dawn we learned her daughter had only suffered scrapes and bruises.

The next day, the buses returned without Eliseo, since his classmates and teachers, worried as they were about the wellbeing of Teacher Débora's children, hadn't noticed his absence.

"They must have picked him up from his room," Humberto said when someone asked him about it, almost as we arrived, with a smile so forced it cracked at the corners.

It was only around seven that evening that Eliseo's parents raised the alarm through Radio Atalaya.

Eliseo's disappearance shook all of Santander that week; the police launched searches that fed the newspapers' sensationalist headlines: "Mysterious Disappearance of a Six-Year-Old Boy"; "Eliseo, Third Place in Grades, Lost at the Club del Cañón"; "Trip of Death?"

Humberto then disappeared, leaving his belongings behind at the Hotel Bucarica, where he'd

been staying, confirming my worst suspicions. The police filled its wide terraces facing Parque Santander, interrogating the staff, and later, the teachers from the Anexa. It was decided that we should go home.

Back at home, around four in the afternoon, still being punished over the coin episode—unable to go out and play, confined to my room—I stood at the barred window of our big colonial house, watching the neighborhood children play soccer on the side street, hearing their laughter, celebrations of a freedom I had lost. "This time," I thought, by way of comfort, "justly so." Because, hadn't what I'd done been theft? A violation of the seventh commandment? I should sit down instead and do my homework, since at dawn I'd have my household chores to do.

Perhaps my childhood was slipping away like sand between my fingers, but while my little friends had their fun, I had discovered the joy of reading and finding new worlds within emptiness. I sighed, thinking of the new *Vida Animal* installment my father would bring home that night.

I looked up at the Viaduct, the endless highway bridge embedded in the plateau's slopes like a battering ram of belligerent asphalt, and saw two men at the rusted railing: one standing, gesturing with arms like broken wings, the other limp as a mannequin in an olive-green suit, hanging slack over the abyss.

Suddenly, the standing man pushed the limp one, who was hurled into the void; a body spinning silently down toward the La Iglesia stream, a dull,

distant impact against the rocks, lost in the roar of the cars.

At once, the residents of the cardboard houses covered in tar and zinc roofing, in what had once been the San Martín squatter settlement—now with land legally deeded to its residents by the municipality—came out of their doorways and surrounded the bloodied body like ants swarming a lump of sugar.

"Another poor devil killed himself!" someone laughed, with that morbid satisfaction born of knowing one doesn't belong to the circle of the suicidal.

"And a rich one, too!" someone else shouted.

The next day, *La Crónica* confirmed it in black ink:

CIVIL SERVANT THROWS HIMSELF FROM THE VIADUCT FOR FAILING TO WATCH OVER A CHILD.

Humberto, sought after his disappearance, had left a scrawled note saying he felt guilty over Eliseo's disappearance, and that this was why he was taking his own life, a leap that smelled of forced atonement.

The documents in his pockets, soaked but legible, were matched to his fingerprints, closing the case as a suicide that left more questions than answers in my fertile imagination, like the ambiguous ending of *Treasure Island*, where the hero forgives the story's villain.

"I was far away," I thought; "I might have seen it wrong… but I would swear a pair of hands pushed him…"

Chapter 10. The Trades of the Fathers

The echo of the Ministry's white buses, pulling away from the Club del Cañón and leaving behind the fleeting luxury and the mystery of Eliseo's disappearance, opened a harsh season of trial that would reveal my mother's resilience and my father's remarkable ability to reinvent himself.

In the spacious colonial house in the El Diamante II neighborhood, whose freshly painted walls and mottled tile floors had already borne witness to the dramas of our lives, the silence became a more intimate, cutting kind of emptiness, ever since my father, David Saint-André, lost his job. Fired from the land registry office after a long, humiliating severance process that dragged on nearly a month, his face, that May afternoon in 1976, was a mask of defeat and hope. He came home carrying the envelope containing his severance check, a payment he set on the dining table like a trophy earned through sacrifice and integrity.

Facing my mother, Adelia, and me, his eyes shone with a spark that defied the gloom of our spacious kitchen, where the aroma of roasting arepas hung like a silent reproach, and the evening light filtered through the barred windows, painting long shadows on the floor.

"With this, another life begins," he said, his voice as firm as the steel of his old surveyor's compass. "I will never depend on the State again."

And he kept his word. The following week, using almost all of his severance pay, he bought a turquoise 1953 Chevrolet truck, a relic with rounded fenders and a thick iron body, a beautiful antique that looked as though it had rolled straight out of Captain Nemo's workshop, the genius of Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, built like the Nautilus to cross abysses with the determination of a man who refused to surrender. He spent days in our garage, Bucaramanga's sun burning the back of his neck as he checked the engine, polished the chrome until it reflected the blue sky, and tightened screws with a goldsmith's patience, as though every piece were a fragment of his recovered dignity, an echo of the mechanical inventions that filled the pages of Verne. When he started the engine for the first time, the rumble of its straight-six engine filled El Diamante II, a rumble that echoed through the neighboring houses with their colonial façades and lemon-tree courtyards, music that, to him, was the promise of freedom, and to me, an echo of adventures as thrilling as those of *Journey to the Center of the Earth*.

His first journey took him to Oiba, the birthplace of our ancestors, a town of cobbled streets and colonial houses where time seemed frozen sometime in the 1940s, a landscape worthy of one of Sandokan's adventures in Emilio Salgari's *The Tiger of Mompracem*, where heroes fought colonizers in dense jungles and treacherous seas. His uncle lived there, Don Augustus Saint-André, the town's mayor, a man with a neat moustache and the manners of a nineteenth-

century aristocrat, whose office was decorated with yellowed family portraits and a sword hanging on the wall, a memento of his great-grandfather Ramón de Saint-André, who, according to family legend, had made a fortune exporting tons of salt he'd bought in Zipaquirá in the 1910s to Spain. Augustus received my father in his office, the air heavy with the scent of old paper and freshly brewed coffee, and spoke to him with the frankness of someone who knew Colombia's crooked rules, a country where honesty was falsely equated with naïveté.

"I can't give you a job at the mayor's office, David," he said, adjusting the felt hat he wore even indoors. "But I can offer you an opportunity."

"What, Uncle?" my father asked, his hands gripping the edge of the wooden chair, his posture reminding me of Verne's explorers, always ready for the next challenge.

"Meat."

And so began my father's second life. Augustus offered to sell him meat from the municipal slaughterhouse at cost, for resale in Bucaramanga, where downtown restaurants, with their polished wooden tables and smells of garlic and cilantro, paid well for fresh cuts. He warned him the law forbade transporting meat without a health permit, and that, if caught, they could seize his truck, his only tool of redemption. "But in this country, son, the law is like a hat: you take it off or put it on depending on the sun," he added, with a knowing smile, a saying that reminded me of the cunning of Salgari's characters, navigating

between colonial laws and codes of honor. My father smiled, shook his hand, and accepted. He returned to Bucaramanga with the first shipment of meat wrapped in ice-soaked sacks, the smell of fresh blood soaking into the Chevrolet's upholstery, an aroma that seeped into our colonial house, mixing with the scent of the courtyard's bougainvillea.

He delivered the cuts to three downtown restaurants: La Puerta del Fuego, San Mateo, and Carne Santandereana, places where white-aproned waiters served steaming plates to customers discussing politics and business. The owners, surprised by the low prices, paid him in cash and asked for more, their eyes gleaming with the greed of those who see an opportunity in someone else's need, like the merchants of *One Thousand and One Nights* haggling in spice-filled bazaars. In a week, my father made three trips; in a month, twelve, the turquoise truck becoming his inseparable ally, a symbol of resistance in a city where 1976's inflation devoured the middle class's dreams like a fire in a dry pasture, leaving families like ours counting every peso with that fear of financial ruin so typical of the unemployed.

He left every Monday at dawn, when shadows still stretched over the highway, crossing through the belly of the García Cadena Viaduct, silhouetted against a grey sky like a scar of asphalt on Bucaramanga's face. He came back on Wednesdays, the miasma of blood and salt soaked into his clothes, his face weathered by sun and dust, but with a gleam in his eyes that spoke of recovered pride.

My mother and I waited for him in the entryway of our colonial house, the wooden door creaking under our anxious hands, the courtyard's lemon tree laden with green fruit like promises. During those days, our routine was quiet, almost sacred: my mother and I swept and mopped the house in the mornings, the sound of the broom against the red tile floor like a prayer for lost stability.

At half past twelve, we took the bus to the Rufino José Cuervo School, a fifteen-minute ride that smelled of gasoline and sweat, where my mother taught with an iron hand and I struggled to hold my place among the "champions" of perfect grades. My innate hyperactivity—the same trait that had earned me a two in conduct and discipline at the Anexa, exiling me to the Lagos III school—kept getting me into small trouble, like fidgeting too much at my desk, or asking questions that interrupted the lesson.

In the afternoons, coming home, little Gabriela waited for us in the company of Matilde or Nonita Kuki. I'd change my clothes and have a mortadella sandwich or an Arcabuco *almojábana* with reinoso cheese and Girón chocolate for an early dinner, still in my shorts. Only two afternoons a week did my father's voice ring out, his rough laugh echoing through the corners like the notes of an enchanting tuba in some ancestral village.

Over time, the trips multiplied: four, sometimes five a week. The Chevrolet roared down roads full of potholes and improvised checkpoints, where police in faded uniforms held out their hands for papers.

Abundance rubbed its hibernating bear's snout across the horizon of every trip, the hope of a family living with its belt tightened, counting every peso as though it were the last.

But the world—and, above all, the neighbors—never forgives the prosperity of those who have fallen.

Wiston, an employee at the land registry office and my father's old rival, with his shifty gaze, puffy cheeks, and clean-shaven face of a timid man, apparently lacking any ambition, began to envy my father's diligence. And, like the infants studied by Melanie Klein, he decided to put all his resources into destroying the object of his envy, even at the cost of his own ruin.

From his house, on the other side of the guava tree separating our yards, he had already invested a considerable budget in secretly photographing my father as he unloaded sacks of grain from his Jeep Willys.

The day he learned of his firing, he felt like the most powerful man in the neighborhood, and celebrated by gathering with his friends from the land registry office at the brothels on Calle Cuarta.

Now, my father's Chevrolet trips kept him up at night: his narrowed eyes calculated every bill my father earned, his envy growing like a poisonous vine.

One afternoon, Denisito, an old friend of my father's from the slaughterhouse, called him on the phone, his urgent voice cutting through the air like a knife through tense silence.

"David, I'm warning you, the union guys are setting a trap for you. Wiston convinced them. They already turned in your truck's plate number."

My mother, apron on, hands still damp from washing dishes at the stone sink in the courtyard, begged him not to travel, her eyes full of a fear I hadn't seen since my expulsion from the Anexa. But my father, with the same faith or confidence that had carried him through villages governed by mayors twisted by bribes, measuring their land, decreeing their taxes, facing their dangers, and returning home unscathed from every assignment, decided to face the serpent of intrigue with cunning.

Putting me to bed, he told me I would go with him as his copilot, no doubt to project the image of a responsible, hardworking man. As soon as we arrived, he bought and sent off the meat in another rented truck, driven by a friend from Oiba, while he drove his empty Chevrolet, its new upholstery scent his only cargo besides me.

They stopped us at a checkpoint on the outskirts of Bucaramanga; the inspectors checked every corner, their flashlights lighting up the cab floor as though searching for lost treasure. They found nothing.

We were free to go; the truck, untouched. The inspectors, furious, realized they'd been outsmarted, their shouts echoing down the highway like a merchant betrayed in *One Thousand and One Nights*, outwitted by a shrewder rival.

When he got home, we heard a heartrending scream from Wiston's house, and then a long silence.

My father laughed, and the air distilled victory, an aroma already unfamiliar in our lives of recent accumulated defeats.

When my mother asked whether he'd heard the neighbor's shriek, my father went out to the courtyard with his machete, the blade gleaming under the afternoon sun, and cut the branches of the guava tree encroaching on our property, its leaves falling like fragments of recovered pride.

Wiston, leaning out his window, protested in a high-pitched voice, his face red with rage. My father told him every branch that crossed into his property would be cut, climbed down from the wall, and went out into the front yard, leaving the machete in a corner, silently challenging him to a fistfight.

Wiston hid behind his wife—a tall, bony woman with her hair in a severe bun—and called for his children, Daisy and Tito, to protect himself, his voice trembling in his chosen role as villain before a hero who wouldn't bend.

It was then that my gaze met Daisy's, her eyes as innocent as they were captivating. From that afternoon on, for eleven years, our eyes sought each other in silence, expressing a contained longing, though neither she nor I ever dared take a step that would defy our parents' open enmity.

From that day forward, their feud was public, and the whole neighborhood knew David Saint-André wouldn't let himself be humiliated, not by the union, nor by an envious neighbor who had contributed to his firing with poisonous rumors and illegal photographs.

The meat business, however, began to look dangerous. Rumors, anonymous reports, frequent checkpoints: it was all a constant risk, a game of roulette where the Chevrolet was the wager. My father, with the intuition that had saved him at the checkpoint, changed course before fate could catch him.

The new adventure took us to Cúcuta, on the border with Venezuela, a chaotic world of grey-market trade where a natural free zone arose from the meeting of two nations intersecting, exchanging goods that, under the laws of both countries, constituted a crime. It was small-scale smuggling that nonetheless fed half of Colombia, received at the San Andresito markets of every metropolis, once the goods had cleared checkpoints where guards received, in exchange for their silence, bribes and favors.

State corruption had thus turned my father into an ambiguous figure, one who could be read two ways: as an honest Colombian buying goods, accompanied by his son, or as one of the Malay pirates from Salgari's novels. Navigating invisible borders and constant dangers, my father took me to the butcher shops of San Antonio del Táchira, where Venezuelan meat was very cheap to us, thanks to the subsidies of a government distributing its oil boom's bounty, while Colombian eggs, scarce there, sold for the price of gold.

My father invested his earnings in a network of contacts: he bought eggs in Bucaramanga, took them to Cúcuta in the Chevrolet, and came back with meat wrapped in sacks, the ice melting on the cab floor like

tears of tireless effort, our Nautilus exploring abysses in seas never before sailed, just to survive.

The trips were long, five to six hours over roads covered in leafy branches, fog, and starving dogs crossing the road like howling shadows, the landscape shifting from dry hills to páramos, where heat or cold was an invisible enemy. The nights on the road were hell: the engine's roar, the rattle of potholes, the whistle of wind through the window seals, the fear of checkpoints where police asked for "cooperation" with outstretched hands. Even so, the business thrived as we tamed each obstacle, the bills piling up in his bank account, a treasure that ultimately secured us a long July vacation in Cali, at Aunt Azucena's house, a luxury none of his former colleagues, enslaved to their uninterrupted government jobs, could afford, and which led me to identify my father with *The Count of Monte Cristo* in Dumas's novel, the hero who grows rich by turning the very fall his enemies engineered against him.

Until a warning came by phone, the voice of Denisito, his loyal and frugal assignment assistant, cutting through the air like a meteor breaking the night's stillness.

"This time you won't get away with it, David. They're going to plant contraband meat in your truck so they can seize it. It's a union trap; they want to see you ruined."

That was the end. My father, worn out from fighting a system that punished the honest, throwing them into underemployment that forced them to break laws politicians slyly allowed to be broken to artificially

inflate their rising "employment" figures, and which they only enforced against those they wanted to persecute or destroy, as was happening to him before that all-powerful union, took a few days' rest, until he decided to reinvent himself in a new business.

For Holy Week, Papá took us in his Chevrolet to Barichara and then to Charalá, a trip he planned with a general's precision, ever faithful to his belief that a vacation isn't worthy unless it's done properly. We set off from our house in Bucaramanga's El Diamante II neighborhood, a district of orderly streets and modest houses, surrounded by the fields of the Soto Norte province, between Bucaramanga and Floridablanca. That land, though fertile, was austere, with potato, celery, and corn crops stretching like a green and golden tapestry beneath the relentless sun.

My mother used to say Bucaramanga had every climate: badlands with eroded rock formations toward Girón, forests toward Piedecuesta, jungles toward Rionegro, and lofty páramos toward Cúcuta. The frailejón plant reigned as sentinel in the cold heights, accompanied by discreet wildlife: solitary eagles crossing the sky, elusive rabbits, and the occasional snake adapted to the rigors of altitude. It wasn't a lush paradise, but a landscape of survival, shaped by mining that scraped at the mountains and dry winds that hardened the soil.

The road to San Gil was dizzying, winding through the abysmal Chicamocha canyon, on a road that back then barely fit two vehicles, until we reached

the Chiflas restaurant, where we used to eat rib soup and air-dried beef atop its heights, wrapped in fog.

"An example of Charalá grit!" my father said, as we sat at a solid wooden table beside a balcony overlooking the precipice. "Its owner used to grill meat back in town, and he became so famous he now runs the best restaurant in the whole Guane province."

The turquoise Chevrolet resumed its journey with the gentle snout of a tortoise, gliding along the smooth roads of Aratoca under a clear sky, until we reached El Gallineral park, in San Gil. There we swam in a pool that seemed bottomless—rumor had it several children had drowned there—with young people leaping from a diving board, defying gravity with their flips.

"You almost were born here," my mother said, as we set off again for Barichara as evening fell. "But since three pregnant women had already died at the hospital that month, your father flew me up in a small plane so you could be born safe and healthy in Bucaramanga."

The trip to Barichara turned into an ordeal when a storm broke out, as though the sky itself conspired against us. The road, which on dry days was an hour's drive, turned into a treacherous path of slick clay, a sticky red mud that sucked at the Chevrolet's wheels. My father, hands gripping the wheel, slowed to barely five kilometers an hour, zigzagging between mud pits and incipient landslides. The headlights cut through the darkness like weak grappling hooks, barely lighting the road, and danger lurked at every curve: one slip could

send us into the abyss on either side. What should have taken little time stretched into five hours of tension, rain pounding the windshield and the engine roaring in protest.

Barichara received us around midnight, under a still-dripping sky. Its yellow, dusty fields had turned into a treacherous swamp from the storm. The next day, calm revealed its serene colonial beauty: whitewashed rammed-earth houses and clay tile roofs that seemed to defy the passage of time.

We were welcomed by Aunt María, in her house of wide, tall bedrooms, with a freshly built wicker-and-mud roof that made me feel as though I were in a palace. At night, I lay looking into the darkness, listening to the rhythm of the rain, while the smell of wet earth seeped in through the windows.

My parents contributed to her lavish cooking with a shopping haul more abundant than I had ever seen in my life: cans of powdered milk, cookies of every available brand, canned fruit, jelly, caramel spread, cheeses, and sausages, so that our meals became endless feasts of pork, chicken, goat, and beef, served with yuca and avocado-and-chili salads.

Aunt María and her husband, Filemón, owned the town pharmacy, and there I watched them act as doctors to the farmhands, diagnosing illnesses for those who came in from the countryside with weathered faces and fragile hopes. It was the era of the Social Security system, when patients, unless they were followers of the town's political boss, died at the hospital's doors, long before Law 100 would make healthcare a more effective

system. Their compensation was the sale of remedies, a human transaction that transcended mere business.

We visited the imposing red-stone church, with its four-meter monolithic columns, a work my grandfather Cándido had proudly contributed to, as well as the retirement home where we found Aunt Fita, sitting in a rocking chair, telling stories of an almost-forgotten Santander.

"These fields used to be a green, quiet jungle, with tall mango and sycamore trees," she told me when I asked what the town had been like in her childhood. "But the representatives of the great tobacco companies arrived, all very well dressed, mostly Americans, accompanied by secretaries and executives of the National Tobacco Company, and they convinced the men to cut down the trees and plant tobacco. At first it was very profitable, but no one knew that without trees, the wild wind off the Chicamocha would strip away our fertile topsoil through erosion. Within twenty years, not even the tobacco would grow anymore. Then the people of the surrounding towns accused us of being fools and started calling us 'yellow-feet.'"

Those terracotta hills were the opposite of the greenery awaiting us in Charalá. Leaving behind Barichara's yellow aridity, we reached the communero town, where we were welcomed by my great-aunt Petunia, married to Miguel Santamaría, owners of the 350-hectare "La Ganadora" farm. Their fields stretched beyond the horizon, crossed by crystalline rivers like the Fonce, the Pienta, and the Táquiza. The town was a riot of life.

The flora was lush: bamboo groves whispering in the wind, centuries-old ceiba trees rising like guardians, white yarumo trees like elegant ghosts, orchids and bromeliads climbing the oaks. The wildlife enchanted us: blue tanagers and kingbirds dancing in the air, hummingbirds buzzing like living jewels, and endemic frogs croaking in the morning mist. Up in the heights of the Guanentá Alto Río Fonce Sanctuary, it was said spectacled bears roamed, while more than two hundred fifty species of birds filled the sky with their songs.

At "La Ganadora," we went riding across the farm's vast fields, galloping through green pastures and damp forests, and lay in the grass for as long as we liked, watching clouds that seemed painted. We were spoiled by the foreman, whom everyone called the Orinoco Indian, a man with weathered skin and deep eyes who taught us to ride with the patience of the earth itself. He showed us how to knock guamas down from their high branches, how to eat perfumed rose apples, and how to open the spiny corozo fruits without pricking ourselves. At night, he lit bonfires with an ease I've never seen again, not even in adventure heroes, and the flames lit up his stories of elves and witches who lived in Charalá's rivers, tales that kept us awake, our eyes wide open like northern lights.

And, of course, my sister and I bathed for entire days in the legendary Pozo del Gallo, a natural pool beside the Pienta River, whose cold, crystalline waters, surrounded by mossy rocks and lush vegetation, had once belonged to my ancestors. We splashed and

laughed under the sun filtering through the oak canopy, in that watery Eden that justified every minute of the harrowing drive through the storm. It was my secret reward after the Anexa's humiliations; my parents, behind the wheel of their Chevrolet, handed us the Santander paradise from which we'd all been exiled, leaving those nearly two weeks, so brief, feeling like months in my childhood memory.

It was that Sunday, while watching a vendor weigh coal in Charalá's marketplace, that my father had an idea that seemed naïve but shone with the spark of the desperate, like the gamblers in Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days*.

"What if I packed it into small bags and sold it in shops?"

Until then, coal had been bought in large, heavy sacks, at quarries outside the city, a luxury for the poor who cooked with wood or coal on improvised stoves, a ritual that filled kitchens with black smoke. My father began packaging it into one-pound and one-kilo plastic bags, sealed with a plastic-sealing machine my mother bought secondhand at a shoe store's closing sale. He then began sealing bags, launching a new financial venture that would bring prosperity to our family. The product sold itself: practical, clean, accessible, ideal for Bucaramanga families, eager to grill meat at least on Saturdays or Sundays, without having to travel outside the city to find it. Within weeks, our colonial house had become a black depot: bags piled in the hallways, in the bedrooms, even under our beds, black dust drifting into the sheets and leaving footprints on our bare feet. Two

packers, distant cousins of my father's, filled bags all day long, the sound of their funnels scooping up coal like the drumbeat of ceaseless labor, while the dust blackened the walls.

Neighborhood shops, from El Diamante II to downtown, fought over Don David's coal. My father branded his bagged coal CARBOSANDER and printed nearly fifty thousand small colored labels, which his assistants slipped between the plastic and the coal:

Santander Coal, CARBOSANDER.
Orders at 745-679.

To get that phone line, my father rented a house in Floridablanca, where he'd also store the coal. He grew his payroll to five relatives, freeing our house from the soot. The day he brought home a stereo sound system, with giant speakers that shook the colonial windows, the whole neighborhood heard me blasting "Rasputin" at full volume, an anthem celebrating our budding prosperity that echoed all the way to the corner, a moment of joy that reminded me of the celebrations in Hugo's *Les Misérables*, where the humble find respite in music.

"Now you'll have a peso for your snacks," my father told us one day, satisfied with his bank balance. "Every Monday I'll give you five pesos to manage however you like."

My sister and I jumped for joy; from then on, until the day we graduated high school, we would both

have enough to buy ourselves a soda, an empanada, and a biscuit at every recess.

But success, despite the innovation bagged coal represented not only for Bucaramanga but for humanity, was fleeting, like Tesla's inventions, patented not by him but by his rival, Mr. Edison. Besides, his discovery wasn't really an invention, but a great idea, and as such could be replicated endlessly. Imitators soon appeared: those who produced the coal themselves began bagging it too, selling it cheaper, flooding the market with bags at half the price.

One Saturday afternoon, Aunts Lucía, Jazmín, and Lila took my sister and me to see the Argentine the film *Dicen que los hombres no deben llorar*, starring King Clave and Yolanda del Río, a Latin American melodrama that had crowds weeping at the then-unprecedented spectacle of watching a famous macho actor cry like a woman.

Its theme song was all the rage, and my mother played it every night on our new sound system, on repeat. My father picked us up outside the Analucía theater, drove his sisters back to the Mutis neighborhood, and, as soon as we got home, Gabriela and I put it on to listen.

We were called in for dinner. My father then got up from his sofa and swapped our record for his recent favorite, "Oropel," a Jorge Villamil classic performed by his tiple-and-guitar idols, Garzón y Collazos—a song about not gambling away one's happiness twice, about how, once you've lost the hand, all that's left to win, spinning wheel after wheel, is tinsel dressed up as gold.

"Coal was a vein worth mining," he told us all, as we listened to the mournful chords of that song, tasting of mountains and the freshly ground coffee of his childhood, his voice holding back tears with superhuman effort, "and it's the wise man who knows to leave it once its gold has turned to tinsel."

His words made my sister and me burst into tears, expressing the feeling our parents, in their machismo, never once allowed themselves to show in front of us.

The next day, my father, without dwelling on his disappointment through sentimentality, sold off his remaining stock of coal, sold his sealing machine, and gave back the rented house, paying the corresponding penalty. His honesty was his greatest pride, and he always distinguished himself in his ventures by owning up to his financial responsibilities whenever fortune's wheel had turned against him.

Through Don Lisardo, a neighbor with a white moustache and an easy smile who sold insurance door to door, he entered the world of commission sales: insurance, encyclopedias, books promising knowledge on installment plans.

He put his grey suit and blue tie back on, the same ones from his land-registry days, a uniform that smelled of better times. He'd leave each morning with a professional smile, his briefcase full of brochures and hope, and come back at nightfall, his shoes dusty and his voice hoarse from so much talking.

It was on one of those sales trips that he brought home twelve volumes that would change my life: *Our*

Enchanted World, a collection of stories, poems, and adaptations of universal classics. The first volume opened with fables by Aesop and La Fontaine; the last, with condensed versions of *Don Quixote*, *Les Misérables*, and *Great Expectations*. I, confined at home over the stolen coins, found in those books a window onto the world. I spent hours reading by the courtyard window, Bucaramanga's sun filtering through the bars, and at night under the dining room's yellow light, traveling among wandering knights, redeemed wretches, and children dreaming of escaping poverty.

Reading was my magic lamp, the reformulation of the rules that reduced me to a stillness once imposed, now voluntary. The punishments and humiliations were the same villain who reveals himself as benefactor in *Great Expectations*'s unexpected ending, illustrating the Eastern wisdom I would come to contemplate and feel simultaneously in my epiphany of June 2011: if you want a full life, you must suffer through all of it.

My father, satisfied, believed I was becoming studious; my mother, that I was recovering my obedience. But the truth was I remained a fan of comics and stories; this time, because of the ban, I began keeping them at Pepito's house, who gladly served as the Cerberus guarding my treasures.

With my new allowance I bought a weekly comic, alternating between *Tamakún*, *Kalimán*, *El Santo*, and *Blue Demon*, piecing together the missing episodes between one issue and the next each month, often filling in the gaps with other magazines I found at Aunt Chavela's house, or with my aunts, at my grandmother

Elvia's house, who, having discovered my love of reading, gave me boxes of comics she gathered on loan from her neighbors, so I could sit and read whole afternoons whenever my parents, for one reason or another, left me in her care at her house in the Mutis neighborhood.

"I'm happy to look after little Marco!" she'd exclaim, with her charming laugh. "As long as I have something to give him to read, because that boy's reading habit gives us grey hairs."

That same month, May 1976, new magazines began appearing at the newsstands: a series called *Doubt: The Incredible Is the Truth*. My father, curious by nature, and no doubt to impress his cousin Eva, bought me, at her pharmacy in Cabecera, the first two issues of *Doubt*, their glossy covers promising mysteries that echoed Verne's own explorations. I was fascinated by the first one, with stories about UFOs and lost civilizations, like the mysterious great New York blackout. The second issue was a revelation: "The Mystery of the Egyptian Pyramids," a subject that recurred in *Doubt*'s early issues, exploring how the pyramids aligned with constellations and hid paranormal secrets, like extraterrestrial contact or mystical energies defying science. I devoured it in one afternoon, memorizing facts I recited to anyone who would listen: the Great Pyramid's height, 146 meters; the length of its base, 230 meters; its exact proportion to Earth's circumference, as though the Egyptians had known secrets we, in 1976, could barely guess at.

I brought the magazine to the Rufino José Cuervo School and showed it to Pepito, my friend of eternal freckles, whose laugh filled the yellow-dirt courtyard like an anthem of resistance. He asked to borrow it, and I agreed without objection. Then I asked him about our sticker album, a shared treasure we filled through trades and bets at recess.

"I already finished it," Pepito said, his eyes shining with pride. "Let's go see it tomorrow, at recess, behind the school, by the stream."

We agreed to meet up to laugh, remembering how we'd gotten each sticker: the easy ones, traded for candy; the hard ones, like number one and one hundred fifty, won by Pepito at a spinning-top tournament in his neighborhood, where children bet with a gambler's precision. The next day, we sat on a rock by the stream, the clear water caressing our feet, and flipped through the album, its pages full of soccer players' faces that looked like movie heroes. We laughed remembering how we'd traded a third grader two stickers for one, or how Pepito had won number one by betting his favorite spinning top against a rival who cried when he lost. But then, a movement in the water stopped us: a doll floating among the stones, its fabric rippling like the carranchos, the rag figures people burned with fireworks at year's end.

"Someone must have left it behind!" I shouted, excited, taking off my shoes to rescue it before the current carried it away.

Pepito laughed, and we stripped down to our underwear, wading carefully across the slippery stones,

the cold water biting at our ankles, until a foul, penetrating smell stopped us, a stench that wasn't garbage, or wet earth, but something darker, more oppressive.

"It's not a doll!" Pepito shouted, his voice cracking with horror. "It's a dead body!"

I screamed, fear crawling up my spine like an insect, and without thinking I spun around, slipping on the stones. Pepito screamed too and followed me, telling me to be careful. "What if they blame us?" I asked, my heart pounding like a drum, afraid of another misunderstanding like the one that had gotten me expelled from the Anexa. Our screams drew the neighbors' attention, who opened their windows, their voices cutting through the air like knives.

"There's a body here!" I answered, relieved to have witnesses who might keep us from being blamed.

We ran back to school shouting "A dead body! A dead body!," our voices echoing across the yellow-dirt courtyard. My mother came out first, her wide teacher's skirt, yellow, printed with water lilies and giant orchids, billowing like a flag of authority, and interrogated me with her bulging eyes. "It wasn't me, Mamá, there's a dead body in the stream," I said, my voice trembling.

The police arrived minutes later, their boots thudding across the courtyard like a platoon. They recovered the body, a boy bloated by death's dropsy, dressed only in an undershirt and white underwear, his greyish skin glinting under the sun. The officer, a man with a thick moustache and a tired gaze, spoke with

Teacher Sara, the headmistress, in her office, while Pepito and I waited, trembling in our damp uniforms.

"It's a child," the officer said, his voice low but clear. "Is there a child missing from this school?"

"Eliseo!" I exclaimed, connecting the loose ends in my childish mind, the memory of the Club del Cañón falling over me like a stone.

I told them everything: Eliseo's disappearance on the outing, the "special workshop" with Humberto, the coordinator who had disappeared after the event, his supposed suicide reported in *Flanco Conservador* with a guilty note. The police took notes, their pencils scratching the paper as though carving my testimony into stone. Inspector Zuluaga, a thin man with dark glasses who smelled of cigarettes, questioned me in a small room at the school, his questions sharp but patient.

"Did you see anything strange that day, little one?" he asked, leaning toward me.

"Humberto took Eliseo away," I said, my voice steady despite my fear. "He said it was for a prize, but Eliseo never came back. And then Humberto killed himself, the paper said so. But I saw something on the Viaduct, sir. I saw a man push a body wearing Humberto's suit, like he wanted to trick everyone. It wasn't a suicide, it was a trick!"

Zuluaga frowned, writing down every word. He asked whether I'd touched the body in the stream, whether I'd seen anyone nearby.

"No, sir, we only saw it floating," I answered, my hands clenched to keep from shaking.

Pepito, beside me, nodded silently, his face pale. A coroner examined the body, his latex gloves gleaming under the sun.

"The state of decomposition suggests weeks in the water," the coroner said, his voice clinical. "There's no evidence these children were involved."

Zuluaga looked at me, his expression softening.

"You're free to go, little one. But the thing about the Viaduct… that's a serious accusation. Are you sure of what you saw?"

I nodded, though fear gripped my chest like a rope. Eliseo's bloated body remained vividly present in my mind, as though I were Jean Valjean, carrying my guilt in *Les Misérables* not for having stolen a set of silver cutlery, but for having tripped a boy without knowing his tooth might chip, a misfortune that had brought about my expulsion, and then his own vindication, usurping my place as the Anexa's third-best student, and then this… seeking redemption and meaning in a murderous world.

The police opened the case as a homicide with no clear culprits, the body identified as Eliseo by his chipped tooth—the one I myself had caused at the Anexa, on the real tooth that would now never grow back—confirmed by his parents' dental records.

Flanco Conservador ran a brief note:

CHILD MISSING FROM SCHOOL OUTING FOUND DEAD IN STREAM

They made no mention of Humberto, but in my mind, he was a villain like Long John Silver in *Treasure Island*: a buccaneer who had manipulated civil servants

into believing he was a professional in education, so thoroughly that they'd entrusted him with the captaincy of his pilot program in our metropolitan area.

That same day, at school, a local radio station set up an improvised microphone in the courtyard, eager to capture the drama in all its raw horror. The reporter, a man with a deep voice and a thick moustache, sat Pepito and me in plastic chairs, the sun burning our backs.

"Marco, Pepito, you two found the body. What was your first impression?" he asked, his pen scratching a notebook.

Pepito, nervous, stammered that it had been a terrible scare, that we'd thought it was a doll. I, my heart pounding as though *Kalimán* himself were being interviewed, spoke with the greatest frankness.

"It was Eliseo, sir. And I think Humberto, the man from the Ministry, killed him. I saw him at the Viaduct, throwing a fake body wearing his clothes, like he wanted to trick everyone. The body had been dead for more than a day, but the suicide happened just half an hour before. It was a trick!"

The reporter leaned in, his eyes bright.

"Are you saying you saw the Ministry of Education's advisor push a fake body? How can you be sure, little one? Tell me in detail."

"From my window in El Diamante II, I saw two men at the railing. One pushed the other, dressed in olive green, like Humberto. He fell into the stream."

"From El Diamante II? You mean, from hundreds of meters away? You'd need an eagle's eyesight for that…"

My mother, who had gradually come closer, cut in with a nervous laugh, her hands gripping my shoulder.

"Don't pay him any mind, Mr. Reporter. Marco has an overactive imagination. He reads too many comics that fill his head with delusions. What he saw was a dream, or a shadow."

"I'm not talking about *Kalimán* against Martians," I said, referring to his recent adventure, The Mystery of the Astronauts.

The reporter frowned, disappointed, and changed the subject, asking Pepito about the smell of the corpse. His disinterest in my account, at my mother's urging, wounded me like an arrow lodged in my chest. I felt the weight of his disbelief, like Tom Canty, the protagonist of *The Prince and the Pauper*, when no one believes his version of the truth.

In Bogotá, at the Casa de Nariño, the air was thick with tension and official paper. President Alfonso López Michelsen, a man with a tired gaze and an impeccable suit, called an urgent meeting in a white-walled room adorned with portraits of founding fathers, the scent of freshly ground coffee and printer's ink filling the space. Eliseo's disappearance had escalated; the headlines of *El Tiempo* and *El Espectador* accused the government of negligence ahead of the coming elections. Before him stood the Minister of Education, a plump man with fogged glasses, and the Commander of the National Police, a soldier with a weathered face and a deep voice.

"Explain to me how we allowed an infiltrated terrorist to organize an educational program right under our noses," the President said, his voice cutting.

The minister, nervous, adjusted his tie.

"Mr. President, Humberto Bustamante was recommended by old communist party comrades, contacts from your own campaign. He presented impeccable credentials: degrees from the National University, experience in social programs. He proposed the Celebration of the Best as a gesture toward poor children, a symbol of your popular government. Now I understand his true aim was to sabotage it, to orchestrate a disappearance that would tarnish your image before the elections. He deceived us all."

The President drummed his fingers on the mahogany table.

"And how did we not catch this? Where is this Humberto now?"

The Commander stepped in.

"Mr. President, the subject left a suicide note and threw himself from the García Cadena Viaduct, in Bucaramanga, according to the reports. But allow me to introduce Inspector Zuluaga, our best man in Santander."

Zuluaga, thin, in dark glasses, walked in; his grey suit smelled of cigarettes.

"Mr. President, with all due respect, I doubt Humberto took his own life. The coroner's report indicates the body found had been dead at least six hours before it was recovered."

"Six hours falls within the margin of error," López Michelsen replied, with that corrective tone he used with all his subordinates.

"Discounting the time the body spent without refrigeration," Zuluaga added, "the estimate stretches to nearly a full day."

"A full day?" López Michelsen asked, incredulous. "Too long if he was murdered, wouldn't you say?"

Zuluaga sighed; it was time to play his winning card.

"I looked into whether any body was missing from the morgue, and indeed: here is a photograph of Elías Londoño, a criminal lynched by the community in the San Francisco neighborhood the day before. And this is Bustamante's, for comparison."

López Michelsen nodded, recognizing the resemblance between the two images.

"The injuries don't match a recent fall," Zuluaga went on, now with the President's full attention. "I believe there was a substitution of identity, staged so the real Humberto could escape. He was a guerrilla, likely ELN, trained in subversive tactics. I promise to solve this case, Mr. President."

The President nodded, his face hardened.

"Do it, Zuluaga. And quickly. We cannot let this disappearance sink us."

A week later, around noon, as the sun scorched the streets of Lagos III, three men arrived at Pepito's humble home, a shack of corrugated zinc and rough

timber at the edge of the ravine. They were Matías Argüello, a broad-shouldered man with cold eyes who smelled of liquor and power; his son Luis, a gaunt young man with a scar across his cheek; and Asdrúbal, Luis's friend, a wiry fellow with a crooked grin that reminded me of Blind Pew from *Treasure Island*.

They walked in without knocking, their footsteps echoing across the dirt floor like the first rumble of an approaching storm. Pepito's family was inside: his father, a lean laborer with calloused hands hardened by years of fieldwork, and his mother, a dark-eyed woman who survived by mending other people's clothes. In a deep, commanding voice, Matías ordered Luis and Asdrúbal to restrain them.

"Tie them to the chairs," Matías whispered, his voice as cold as steel. "I don't want any interruptions."

Luis and Asdrúbal obeyed, binding Pepito's parents with thick ropes that bit into their skin. Pepito's father struggled, hurling insults at the intruders, his words nearly swallowed by the murmur of the stream outside.

"You bastards! Sons of bitches! Are you from Cimitarra? You already stole the little cassava plot we had there. What else do you want? Leave my family alone!"

His mother spat at them.

"So now you finally admit farming is for the poor! God will punish you! What are you going to take from us now, when this shack is all we have left?"

Irritated and unwilling to hear either their fears or the long history of suffering behind them, Matías

ordered his men to gag them with filthy rags. Their mouths were sealed with tight knots that smothered their cries into muffled groans.

Trembling in a corner, Pepito saw his own terror reflected in his parents' faces, their bodies bound like helpless little caterpillars caught in a spider's web.

Matías turned toward him, malice glittering in his eyes.

"Tell me, boy. Do you know Marco Saint-André?"

"I don't know who he is," Pepito lied, his voice quivering like a leaf in the wind.

"Liar!" Asdrúbal shouted, stepping forward with a raised fist, his breath reeking of cheap liquor. "The radio said you and some kid named Marco found the body in the ravine. But that corpse was supposed to be Marco Saint-André, not some boy called Eliseo. Why did they switch identities?"

Pepito remained silent, his eyes fixed on the floor, fear freezing him like the gaunt castaway in *Treasure Island*. Furious, Asdrúbal threatened to burn his parents alive while they sat tied to their chairs.

"The first time I ever saw him was down by the ravine, beside that dead boy!"

"Oh, really?" Matías laughed with mocking amusement.

At a signal from Luis, Asdrúbal stepped outside for a couple of minutes and returned carrying a gasoline can. He splashed the fuel across the wooden floor, the chemical stench filling the shack the way I would later see the Nazis do in the television miniseries *Holocaust*.

"Talk, or your parents will burn like the land squatters they are!"

Tears filled Pepito's eyes. Broken by terror, he finally yielded.

"Marco goes to school with me... at Rufino José Cuervo."

"Doesn't he attend the Anexa School?" Luis asked, puzzled, his scar twisting into a grimace.

"No," Pepito whispered. "He was expelled from there..."

"Damn it!" Luis shouted, turning toward Matías. "Didn't you include his full name in the telegram you sent to your old address?"

"No," Matías replied, hissing the words in a dry voice sharp as broken glass. "I only wrote what you approved yourself: *My love, our secret son is ranked third academically in the first grade at the Anexa Normal School. What reward are you going to give him? Sincerely, the hidden mother of your son.*"

Matías laughed then, pleased and enraged at the same time—frustrated by his failure, but even more by the effort and intrigue Gil had invested in eliminating, if not his enemy's son, then an innocent stranger he had mistaken for his supposed grandson.

Their arrogance—or fate itself—had turned against them. Yet Matías, like every true scoundrel, possessed Lucifer's megalomania, believing he could defy not only the Creator but destiny itself.

"The plan went off course," Matías said, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial whisper, "but we can still fix it. Gil—or Humberto, as he calls himself

now—thinks he killed the brat. We can reveal the original lie as though it were a brand-new truth correcting his mistake. We'll send another telegram with the exact address of your supposed lover."

Asdrúbal pulled out paper and a pencil while Matías dictated slowly, savoring every word.

"MY LOVE STOP OUR SON MARCO SAINT-ANDRÉ HAS MIRACULOUSLY SURVIVED STOP HE WAS EXPELLED IN MARCH AND HAS BEEN ACCEPTED INTO MY SCHOOL STOP RUFINO JOSÉ CUERVO STOP ANOTHER BOY TOOK HIS ACADEMIC PLACE STOP THAT BOY WAS KILLED STOP I'M WAITING FOR YOU STOP 88TH AVENUE 22-46 STOP."

Now tied to a chair himself, Pepito wept silently, his body shaking like a leaf. Matías leaned close, his hot breath brushing the boy's face.

"So, you were planning to report us on the radio?"

Pepito shook his head, tears falling onto the wooden floor like rain. Impatient, Asdrúbal slapped him hard, the crack echoing through the shack like thunder.

"You little snitch!"

Matías raised a hand, stopping his accomplice.

"No. Leave him. We have everything we need now. Let's burn every trace and go after the real target."

The men poured more gasoline, the liquid splashing across the floor and against the zinc walls, which creaked beneath the blazing midday heat. Pepito

screamed while his parents writhed beneath their gags, their eyes bulging in horror. Asdrúbal struck a match. The tiny flame danced in his hand like a demon before he tossed it onto the floor.

The fire erupted at once, devouring the shack with a deafening roar. Thick black smoke billowed into the sky like a banner of destruction. The arsonists fled, climbed into a Ford taxi, and vanished into the metallic current of the highway, abandoning Pepito and his family to the mercy of the flames.

At school, I sat at my desk wondering what could have happened to Pepito, who had never once arrived late, when a terrified scream burst into our social studies class.

"Pepito's house is on fire!"

I ran, ignoring my mother's cries begging me not to go, warning me that it was too dangerous.

I reached the roadside, where a crowd of onlookers had gathered, staring as black smoke climbed into the sky like an omen. I heard Pepito screaming from inside and I tried to leap into the flames, my heart pounding with the desperate need to save my friend. Two men seized me, their hands as strong as chains, while my mother cried from behind them,

"Please, stop him!"

I finally broke free and dashed across the wooden bridge, just as a tongue of flame caught one of its vine railings. The planks gave way beneath my weight, and I plunged into the waters of the ravine, striking my head against a rock.

Chapter 11. The Course of La Calavera

Organized by Father Fito, a priest with a honeyed voice and a thin moustache who had made a name for himself preaching love in a tone somewhere between a homily and a motivational talk, the Marriage Encounter was the event of the year for the couples of the Diamante II neighborhood.

They said Father Fito had a gift for reviving exhausted marriages, of spouses who now only spoke to take turns with the television remote or argue over grocery expenses. His method was strict but positive: three days shut away at a country estate near Piedecuesta, with spiritual exercises that included guided meditations at dawn, walks along paths lined with eucalyptus trees where couples had to walk hand in hand in silence, cross-confessions in which each spouse laid out their faults before the other under the chaplain's benevolent gaze, couples' exercises set to soft acoustic guitar played by a seminarian with an angelic voice, and, at the end, a "renewal of vows" that ended in group hugs, cathartic tears, and promises to start over, blessed with a silver crucifix Father Fito passed from hand to hand.

The retreat took place at an old estate called Villa Ascensión, with rustic wooden cabins that smelled of fresh pine and damp earth, surrounded by green hills where lazy cows grazed and the wind carried echoes of distant church bells. The spouses who came back from

the "Encounter" returned changed: eyes brighter, as though they'd rediscovered a forgotten secret; hands intertwined once more in a gesture that seemed newly invented; and an air of reconciliation that smelled of freshly cut orchids and renewed purpose.

In the neighborhood they said, half seriously and half in jest, that the Marriage Encounter was the country's most effective birth-rate program, because nearly every couple who attended came back pregnant. The wives, rejuvenated by love hymns sung in a circle around a bonfire and predawn confessions that released years of accumulated resentment, and the husbands, absolved of their guilt and temptations in private sessions where Father Fito reminded them that passion was a divine gift when properly channeled; husband and wife rediscovered each other in those rammed-earth-and-lime-walled cabins, where guilt was forgiven and desire found its sacred path. There was no shortage of giggling among the neighbor women at their afternoon gatherings, chopping scallions in the courtyard or hanging out laundry beneath Bucaramanga's sun:

"That's right, Father Fito never fails," Doña Carmen from the corner would say, her laugh cracked from years of smoking Pielroja cigarettes. "Every Marriage Encounter ends with a new little Christian on the way. It's as though the Holy Spirit comes down in the form of… well, you all know."

And the other women laughed, covering their mouths with their calloused hands, exchanging mischievous glances. My mother, blushing but with a candid smile that neither confirmed nor denied it,

nodded graciously whenever they mentioned her, perhaps remembering her own nights at the estate. My father, proud of his rediscovered domestic faith, answered solemnly that God blessed those who gave themselves a new chance, quoting Bible passages he'd learned in the group sessions, like Ephesians on mutual love.

So that Friday, my sister Gabriela, Adelia, and I watched them pack with the solemnity of a renewed wedding. She, my mother, tried on the same light-cotton navy dress twice, adjusting the belt to show off her figure, still slender despite the years and the children, while checking her suitcase again and again to make sure she'd packed the pearl rosary my Nonita Kuki had given her.

Papá, already in his cotton undershirt, combed his hair with Glostora, that oily, perfumed pomade men of the fifties and sixties used to tame their hair and give it a movie-star shine, until his black hair gleamed like fresh shoe polish, while Mamá carefully ironed his new sky-blue shirt, running the hot iron over it on the kitchen's side table. Papá took the starched shirt, buttoned it with chrome fasteners, and fastened his trousers, adjusting his belt as though headed to an important appointment, not a spiritual retreat.

They left after lunch in their turquoise truck—the same one that had carried smuggled meat in the hard days, coal for the neighbors' grills, a true ancestral genius that delivered us dreams of prosperity that now seemed closer at hand—leaving behind the smell of chicken and rice still hanging in the house. They left us

in Matilde's care, who had come back that week to help with the housework, bringing with her that inexhaustible energy of hers and her way of making everything feel lighter.

Matilde was a young, plump, cheerful woman, with generous curves that swayed to the rhythm of her quick steps, and a multicolored floral kerchief she wore even to sleep, tied with an expert knot that gave her the air of a happy gypsy. Her heart was as big as her laugh, a deep guffaw that echoed off the house's walls like a contagious echo of joy. She had worked with us before and knew every corner of the colonial house in El Diamante II: every creak of the wooden doors swollen by the damp, every long shadow in the hallway stretching from the entrance to the back courtyard, every stain on the floor tiles telling a story of past spills. When she came back, the atmosphere immediately eased: her morning singing as she swept the courtyard with a branch broom brought some joy back to those walls, tired from the silences accumulated during my parents' crises, and her way of making coffee—strong, with a touch of cinnamon—made mornings feel less heavy.

That house was no longer the same since my father, in one of his fits of modernity spurred by his recent sales, decided to build us a study in the courtyard. He had converted that kindergarten jungle into our movie-screening room: a spacious room with polished granite flooring that gleamed under the sunlight filtering through a large window with galvanized aluminum shutters that opened with a little lever, and, at its center,

our new 20-inch Sharp television. It was an enormous piece of furniture, almost a technological altar, with turned legs like an antique cabinet, a varnished wooden door that opened with a satisfying click to reveal the screen, and golden knobs that smelled of freshly cast copper and a promising future. It was our pride, the technological heart of the household, a symbol that we had left behind the days of coal piled in the courtyard and the risky smuggling my father had taken on in his youth. Now, with his sales of educational books and life insurance, we could afford such luxuries, and the television, with its new six-armed curved antenna, became the center of our movie nights, projecting black-and-white images that carried us off to unimaginable worlds.

That Saturday it had rained since early morning, the prelude to a dense, wintry storm that made the colonial roof tiles vibrate like ceremonial drums, dragging highland cries with its persistent weight and unbroken rumble. Raindrops beat against the eaves with an irregular clatter, and water twisted through the gutters, carrying yellowed almond leaves, wilted white-lily petals, and that smell of wet carnation that in Bucaramanga always carried with it a vague premonition of something imminent.

Matilde made hot chocolate with almojábanas and let us eat in front of the television, something my mother would never have allowed, with her strict rules about times and places. But with our parents away, Matilde ruled with cheerful indulgence. The chocolate was thick, whipped with the wooden molinillo until it

formed a creamy foam my mother never quite managed, and the hot almojábanas, fresh from the gas oven, gave off a smell of curdled cheese and tender corn that filled the kitchen.

When the clock struck nine—our usual bedtime—no one sent us to bed. Matilde, busy folding clothes in the back room with precise movements, humming a Camilo Sesto ballad, only said, in an indulgent, almost conspiratorial voice:

"Don't stay up too late, now, there's eight o'clock Mass tomorrow."

That was enough to make us feel the night belonged to us, an unexplored territory of freedom under the rain.

At ten sharp, Channel 7's signal stabilized after minutes of static, and the Saturday program began: *The Horror Fair*.

I will never forget that sleepless evening. It was the first horror film we had ever watched in our lives, and though the picture was still black and white—since the television predated the miracle of color, which would arrive years later—nothing prepared us for the horrors it brought. The music began at once, not an ordinary melody but the metallic screech of a fairground organ, one of those antique music boxes played at traveling circuses, its off-key notes rising and falling as though the machine itself were sick. There was something of contained laughter in the sound, of sinister mockery. Notes that invited, and warned.

The camera moved slowly through an empty, dark space. There were no elaborate sets, only deep

shadows and an artificial fog that seemed to crawl across the floor like a living thing. Suddenly, a tall, thin figure emerged: the host. He wore a threadbare black coat with wide velvet lapels hanging like broken wings, and a top hat tilted slightly to one side, as though defying gravity. His face was plaster-white, with sharp cheekbones casting knife-edged shadows under the dim light, and dark red-painted lips that violently contrasted with his skin's extreme pallor. But it was his eyes that paralyzed: two deep black voids, no visible iris, like glowing coals sunk into sockets too large for them, eyes that seemed empty, without any reflection at all.

He stood still for a few seconds, looking directly into the camera with an intensity that made it feel as though he could see us, in our own house, in the rain. Then, with a slow, deliberate motion, he leaned his head forward, breaking the fourth wall with a smile that stretched beyond what seemed natural, as though the muscles of his face were pulled taut to the point of tearing, revealing yellowed teeth that gleamed faintly in the gloom.

"Welcome, ladies and gentlemen…" his voice was cavernous, an amplified whisper that seemed to come from very far away, from a deep well or a forgotten tomb, "…to the Horror Fair."

The smile never left. It stayed fixed, painful, as he walked forward with measured steps, dragging his left foot slightly as though he carried an invisible chain. Behind him, the shadows moved as though they had a life of their own, stretching and contracting in time with the music.

"Tonight," he continued, gesturing to one side with a black cane we hadn't noticed before, a cane with a silver skull-shaped handle, "I invite you to tour the tents of our humble show. Each one holds a story… a small lesson about human nature."

The camera followed him as he walked down a dark corridor flanked by torn red curtains, like open wounds in the fabric. In the distance, indistinct murmurs could be heard, muffled laughter that sounded like distorted sobbing, the creak of old wood beneath invisible feet that could belong to spectators, or to ghosts.

"But I warn you," he said, stopping abruptly and turning back to the camera with a movement that made his coat creak, "that once you enter… there is no way out. The show… never ends."

My sister covered her eyes with the sheet she'd brought from her room, an instinctive gesture of protection against the unknown. I, on the other hand, couldn't look away. There was something hypnotic about that figure, in the cadaverous grace of his movements, in the timbre of his voice that echoed inside my head like a persistent echo, repeating words that dug in like thorns.

The first tent appeared on screen. It was a small circus tent, red and white stripes faded by time and weather, as though it had been abandoned in a concentration camp. The host drew back the curtain with a theatrical gesture, revealing an interior lit by a gas lamp flickering erratically. There sat a man in a swivel chair, bare from the waist up, covered entirely in

tattoos. They weren't ordinary tattoos: they were detailed images of faces screaming in silence, of hands reaching out from his skin as though trying to escape the body imprisoning them, of open eyes watching him from his own torso, eyes that seemed to track the camera's movement.

"This is Jacobo," the host announced, in a soft, almost affectionate voice, as though speaking of an old friend. "Jacobo was an artist of pain. He believed each tattoo brought him closer to the truth of his existence. He wanted to carry his suffering written on his skin, visible to all, a living canvas of his inner torments."

The camera moved in on Jacobo's face, a gaunt face with open but lifeless eyes, his mouth half-open in a rictus of eternal agony. A black tear—fresh ink—rolled down his cheek, leaving a trail that mixed with the designs.

"But suffering…" the host went on, coming closer and touching his shoulder with the tip of the cane, a touch that visibly raised the skin, "…has its limits. And Jacobo crossed them all. Now he lives inside his own tattoos. Watch…"

The images on Jacobo's skin began to move. The faces opened and closed their mouths in silent screams, the hands twisted as though trying to claw at the air, the eyes blinked with a terrifying synchrony. It had to be a cheap cinematic trick, but it was happening before us. Jacobo screamed, but no sound left his mouth; only his tattoos screamed for him, a silent chorus of horror.

The second tent was smaller, lit only by a solitary candle casting dancing shadows on the canvas walls. An elderly blind woman, her eyes covered by a black kerchief tied tight, sat before a splintered wooden table. She reached her hands forward, beckoning with fingers wrinkled like dry roots.

"This is Madame Livia," the host said, in an almost reverent tone, as though bowing before a fallen queen. "She sees what no one else can see. She knows when, where, and how you will die."

A young man, ordinary in every way, in a plaid shirt and worn trousers, sat before her with a skeptical smile, while a wall clock ticked toward twenty to twelve. The old woman took his hands, ran her fingers over them, feeling veins and bones as though reading an invisible map, then spoke in a hoarse voice, broken by years of whispering:

"Tomorrow, at some hour, on the stairs of your house. You will fall. Your neck will break. It will be quick, but painful in that final instant."

The man laughed nervously, pulling his hands away with an abrupt gesture, stood, and left the tent, swaying slightly, into the night. The camera followed him insistently. Outside, beneath a grey cardboard sky simulating an approaching storm, the man walked down an empty street flanked by abandoned tents. He reached his house, a gloomy structure with a steep staircase. He climbed the steps hurriedly. Halfway up, he stopped, looked back as though he'd heard a whisper on the wind. Then the midnight bells rang, announcing a new day. The man startled, lost his balance, and fell,

tumbling down. The sound of impact was dry, definitive, a crack that reverberated through the television like an echo in our own room.

My sister moaned and pulled the sheet completely over herself, her body trembling beneath the fabric. I felt a knot in my stomach tightening like a fist, but I couldn't look away, caught in a morbid fascination.

The host reappeared, walking slowly among the tents, his cane striking the ground in time with the distorted music.

"Curiosity ends up being fatal in a world of rules," he declared, and his voice seemed to multiply in echoes filling the room.

Outside, the storm worsened. Thunder began to roll more and more often, shaking the windows violently. The shadows of the neighboring guava tree's recently trimmed branches were cast onto the study walls, moving like deformed figures dancing to the rhythm of the furious wind, as though that horrifying circus extended beyond the screen itself.

The third story was that of the illusionist. A middle-aged man, with a trimmed beard and bright eyes that betrayed a disturbed intelligence, performed tricks before a small audience of indistinct shadows. His assistant—a young woman with raven-black hair and a fitted red dress—smiled confidently as he locked her into a black box adorned with silver stars, only to run it through with sixteen swords, paying no mind to her tortured screams of pain. The audience applauded when her voice went silent and the box began to leak streams of blood through its seams. But then the box hardened,

its walls immune to her pulling and pounding. The illusionist smiled and recited magic words in a sinister voice, until we saw him press a red button. Then we heard the box open. The audience applauded even more enthusiastically, and the illusionist took a microphone, pleased with himself.

"Tonight, as every night, you have witnessed the miserable end of another curious assistant who agreed to work with me in order to steal my secrets. There she is, deformed by my swords of death, still unable to believe there are circles in this world that celebrate crime and murder the inept."

The camera took a sudden turn and revealed, in the Politburo's grand auditorium—surrounded by red cotton banners and large images of Lenin and Stalin—an enslaved audience applauding the assassin with frenzied enthusiasm, demanding that he continue to carry out his ruthless act night after night.

"The perfect trick," the host said, watching the illusionist laugh macabrely over his box, hidden from our view, "is one you cannot escape. One that consumes you from within."

Each spectacle outdid the last in horror: Pierrot the clown, scorned by the crowd for his melancholy jests, until, driven beyond the limits of despair, he seized a paintbrush and splattered the audience with hydrochloric acid, unleashing a blind stampede in which hundreds of worshipers were trampled beneath one another's feet; the lion tamer who, in a calculated lapse, loosed his beast upon the spectators, who were torn apart while the rest looked on with cries of jubilation,

for this was one of Hell's chambers of punishment; the dwarf magician, enslaved to a moneylender, condemned to repeat the same grotesque dance with a chimpanzee that beat him until he fell apart into nuts and bolts before an audience that never wearied of laughter, only for everyone to discover that they themselves were nothing but heaps of scrap metal assembled into mechanical Frankensteins.

The host closed each segment with a different phrase, spoken in his cavernous voice with that fixed smile that never disappeared, like a mask glued to his flesh:

"There is no worse mirror than one's own conscience."

"Whoever plays with fear ends up becoming part of the show."

The rain grew stronger, turning into a hail-laden deluge that pounded the roof with fury. The wind whistled through the window cracks, seeping into the room in cold gusts that smelled of páramo and mud. Every flash of lightning briefly lit up the courtyard, revealing the twisted silhouettes of the trees bending, figures in agony. My sister clung to my arm until her nails dug into my skin.

Then came the final act.

The host, instead of introducing another tent, walked directly toward the camera. His footsteps echoed on a floor we couldn't see, a hollow echo like footsteps in a mausoleum. The organ music grew shriller, more chaotic, its notes distorting into metallic screeches. He stopped so close his face filled the entire

screen, his black eyes seeming to look at us directly, piercing the television glass and fixing on us with an intensity that raised the hair on our skin.

"And now, dear viewers…" he said, and his smile widened to the impossible, revealing dark gums, "it's your turn!"

The camera spun dizzyingly, disorienting. Suddenly we were looking at the fair's audience: dozens of horrified faces, men in fedoras, women in floral dresses, children with eyes wide as saucers, all staring forward with expressions of pure terror, frozen in time. The camera moved among them, approaching each face with agonizing slowness. And suddenly, for a fraction of a second as brief as a lightning flash, I saw my own reflection on the screen. Or at least that's how it seemed. A boy with my brown eyes, my tousled hair, sitting in exactly the same position I was in, with the same crumpled sheet beside him.

My sister screamed, a shrill shriek that cut through the air like a knife.

I wanted to get up and turn off the television, but my legs wouldn't respond, heavy as lead. The knob controlling the set seemed to be kilometers away, unreachable. On screen, the host kept walking among the audience, touching each person with his cane. And each one he touched turned to statue, eyes open and mouth frozen in a silent scream, wax figures in a gallery of horrors.

"Don't change the channel," he said, turning back to the camera with a malicious wink. "The show has barely begun."

At that exact moment, a thunderclap shook the house with a violence that rattled its foundations, as though the sky itself were breaking apart. The lights flickered once, twice, and then went out completely. The television emitted a sharp buzz before falling silent, an electronic wail. The screen went dark, but for one second—one eternal second—the host's face remained there, glowing with its own light in the darkness, smiling that grin that promised more terror to come.

We were plunged into absolute blackness. Only the rain hammering the roof insistently could be heard, and the racing beat of our own hearts, an irregular drumming that filled the silence.

"Matilde!" I shouted, my voice broken with fear.

She was just as terrified as we were, in the armchair beside us.

"Ay, blessed Jesus!" she exclaimed, crossing herself repeatedly with her free hand, tracing quick crosses over her chest.

She got up and felt her way along the walls to the back of the house, returning with a candle that cast trembling shadows on the walls, stretching figures that seemed to dance in a macabre procession.

She found us huddled on the sofa, wrapped up to our necks in the sheet, now damp with cold sweat, our eyes fixed on the black television screen, which still seemed to emanate a residual glow, as though the host's image had been burned into the glass, lying in wait.

We sat in the main living room, better sheltered from the storm. Matilde's candle cast ghostly shadows that, with every tremor of her hand, stretched

silhouettes up to the ceiling. I looked toward the window facing the garden and saw a tall, thin silhouette watching us, now stepping back toward the opposite wall, a figure in a top hat, soaked by the rain.

I jumped up, ignoring the dizziness that swept over me, and ran to the window, bracing my arms on the sill. Outside, the storm had turned the street into a river of murky mud, water running down the sidewalks like open veins. But through the curtain of rain, I could clearly see the neighboring houses' lights were on, flickering cheerfully in the night. Only our house was dark, isolated in the gloom.

"The breakers must have tripped!" Matilde said, heading toward the front door with the candle raised, its flame dancing dangerously close to the curtains.

She turned the key in the lock with trembling hands and twisted it with a metallic click. She was about to open the door to head to the fuse box in the outer hallway, exposed to the weather, when a flash of lightning lit up the sidewalk with a whitish, almost surgical light, revealing every detail in a blinding flash.

It was only a fraction of a second. But it was enough.

Through the fogged-up glass of the door, I recognized a gaunt face, eyes sunken into dark sockets like pools of tar, protruding cheekbones casting sharp shadows, and an expression of absolute emptiness, as though the soul had been sucked out of it. He stood in the rain, motionless, water streaming off his top hat, staring directly at our house with a fixedness that chilled the blood.

It was Humberto Bustamante.

"Wait!" I shouted, lunging at Matilde, right as thunder rumbled with such violence that the window panes shook in their frames, threatening to shatter. "It's a trap! There's a killer outside waiting for you to open it!"

"Nonsense!" Matilde scoffed, but her voice no longer sounded so certain, broken by a tremor that betrayed her bravado. Her hand had stopped on the lock, frozen. "It's just nerves from that devilish movie we watched."

"It's the one who killed Eliseo!" I insisted, with a desperation that surprised even myself, my voice rising above the roar of the rain. "The one who threw Eliseo into La Calavera stream!"

Matilde froze, the candle dripping hot wax onto her hand without her seeming to notice. Her family lived in Lagos III, a humble neighborhood where the houses were packed close together, fostering camaraderie among the neighbors. Her father was a policeman, one of the beneficiaries of that land distribution the government had carried out in 1974 to reward modest civil servants, a political gesture that had created entire communities of retired uniformed men. She knew the story better than anyone: the mysterious disappearances of children in the outlying neighborhoods, the rumors of a killer lurking in the shadows of the ravines, Eliseo's body found bloated among the rocks, with strangulation marks the police had attributed to an "accident," and now said to have

been thrown from the Santísimo hill into the stream, an act that still shook the city.

"Off to bed," she finally ordered, her voice trying to sound firm but trembling like the flame of her candle. "There's eight o'clock Mass tomorrow. And say three Our Fathers before you close your eyes, that scares off any nightmare, any demon."

She secured the lock again with quick movements, as though fearing the door might be forced open at any moment, and led us to our room with the candle raised, casting a circle of light that seemed fragile against the darkness.

We obeyed without protest, dragging our feet down the cold hallway. We took refuge in our room, a shared bedroom with twin beds separated by a nightstand where a wooden crucifix rested. But sleep did not come easily. Every flash of lightning lit the room's interior with bluish flashes, revealing corners that suddenly seemed strange, altered. In every flash I saw—or thought I saw—shadows that didn't match any known object: tall, thin shadows in top hats, silhouettes with sunken eyes watching from the wet sidewalk, specters whispering promises of eternal horror.

My sister prayed in a low voice, mechanically repeating the words Matilde had ordered us to say, her voice a monotonous murmur mixing with the rain's patter. I, on the other hand, kept my eyes open, listening to the storm, waiting for the sound of footsteps in the hallway, the creak of a door opening stealthily, the host's voice whispering in the darkness from the depths of my own mind:

The show never ends.

When my mother came home Monday morning, renewed by the Marriage Encounter and with that shine in her eyes only recovered faith can give, as though she had washed away years of resentment in the estate's blessed waters, the end-of-semester exams began. She carried with her an aura of peace, speaking of how Father Fito had taught them to see marriage as a sacred alliance, and my father followed her with a smile I hadn't seen in months. I, who had always been a diligent student, finished the tests in minutes. The math questions—simple equations, basic geometry—flowed from my pencil effortlessly, clear and definitive answers. History, with independence dates and heroes' names; natural sciences, with the water cycle and animal classifications. Everything had logic, structure. But my mind was elsewhere, trapped at the fair, at the stream, in Humberto's eyes in the rain.

Since my mother had to stay at school until late afternoon—supervising tests, grading papers with her red pen, and organizing stacks of exams—I would sit each day against the hallway wall, my notebooks smelling of the cooking oil we used to trace maps. I'd take out my box of thirty-six colored pencils, a gift from my parents, and start drawing.

The hallway was a long corridor of worn mosaic tiles, its grey walls returning distant echoes of other children's voices. There I traced lines obsessively, hour after hour, oblivious to the end-of-semester loneliness, with children crossing the courtyard as soon as they finished their exams.

The scenes I put down on paper had become recurring: the murder of my informant and of my friend, screaming behind a burning window, and me hitting my head and being rescued by people as I regained consciousness. On one sheet I drew Eliseo being kidnapped by Humberto, who gripped his neck with an enormous, deformed hand, veins bulging like roots, Eliseo's face contorted in pure terror. In another, the body fell into La Calavera's current from Bellavista Hill, on the northwestern spur of the Santísimo hill, arms spread like a wounded bird's broken wings, his face turned toward the sky in one final search for mercy before sinking into the void, the wind distorting his clothes in the drawing. The pencil trembled in my hand—not from fear, but from a kind of silent fever that forced me to repeat, again and again, the fall, the impact against the rocks, the final stillness of the broken body.

Each sheet became a piece of mute confession, a desperate attempt to order the chaos that discovery at the stream had left behind, where Pepito and I had seen horror face to face.

Drawing was the only way I had to process what I had seen, what I knew, what I couldn't say out loud for fear the adults would dismiss it as childish imagination.

One afternoon I drew what obsessed me most: the entire course of the stream. I traced it in blue pencil from its source on the Santísimo hill—an imposing peak where I imagined Humberto had thrown the body under cover of darkness—down to the bend by the

Lagos III neighborhood, the spot where Pepito and I had seen that bloated body floating among the stones, its skin pale, its eyes open in an eternal accusation. In the drawing, the water descended in a spiral, skirting the neighborhoods like a blue serpent cutting through the city, dotted with details: rusted bridges, pastures with grazing cows, precarious houses at the edge of the channel.

I wrote down the names I remembered in careful lettering: Floridablanca, with its cobbled streets; Bucarica, where children played soccer in the mud; the Santísimo hill, with its leafy trees; the course of La Calavera stream; Lagos III, the journey's end. In red ink I marked three points: here he was pushed, a circle on the hill; here he got stuck, on a rocky bend; here we found him, with a cross that dripped like blood.

As I traced the lines, I seemed to hear the murmur of La Calavera's current, an invisible stream crossing the paper and dragging the figures along, erasing faint marks but leaving the important ones. I felt that if I kept drawing, I could make the river speak, could make it tell what no one wanted to hear: the truth behind the disappearances, the reason for the rumors circulating in the neighborhood about a killer hired by mistake, the connection to political figures the press hinted at but never proved.

That was when I heard the footsteps.

Teacher Sara was approaching down the corridor. Her heeled shoes echoed off the mosaic tiles with a regular, measured rhythm, like the tick-tock of a relentless clock. I hadn't seen her coming. I was so

absorbed in my water map that the outside world had vanished, reduced to lines and colors.

She leaned over me and looked at the drawing with a frown, her thick-framed glasses sliding slightly down her nose. Her perfume—a mix of chalk dust, freshly cut exam paper, and wild pine cologne—arrived before her words, wrapping me in a scholastic aura.

"What's this, Marco?" she asked, her voice more curious than stern, though there was an edge of worry in her tone.

I didn't look up, focused on shading a curve in the river.

"Nothing, Teacher. A map."

"A map of what?" she pressed, crouching down to see better.

"Of the water. Of how it flows, of what it carries."

I tried to fold the sheet to hide it, but she was faster, extending her hand with authority.

"May I see it?"

I nodded silently, knowing I had no choice, that adults always claimed the right to inspect.

Sara took the notebook with the tips of her fingers, as though handling a fragile artifact, and studied it closely. Her eyes traced the blue current, paused on the red dots bleeding slightly from the fresh ink, read the words written in small, uneven letters in the margin: "pushed," "stuck," "found."

"And these names?" she asked, after a long silence, her index finger pointing at the neighborhoods.

"What do these crosses mean? They look like… graves."

"They're the places the boy who was killed passed through. They're the milestones of his journey."

"Who?" her voice dropped a tone, as though fearing the answer.

"Eliseo. The water carried him away, but it didn't erase him."

The teacher fell silent. The hallway filled with the distant echo of a bell marking the change of period, ringing insistently, and with the muffled murmur of students still taking their exams, their pencils scratching paper. The wall clock ticked, a constant reminder of time's inexorable advance. A door closed somewhere far off, a slam that reverberated.

Finally, Sara folded the sheet with slow, almost ceremonious movements, and handed it back to me, placing it carefully in my hands.

"You shouldn't think so much about that, Marco," she said, with a tired smile that didn't reach her eyes, worn by years of teaching traumatized children. "There are things that must be erased in order to be happy."

I looked up and met her gaze directly, my eyes fixed on hers.

"Water only carries away what is light; what is heavy, it sinks, and shows again somewhere else."

Sara held my gaze for a few seconds. There was something in her eyes—surprise? worry? fear?—a flicker I couldn't decipher, as though my words had touched an old wound. Then she nodded faintly, a

resigned gesture, and walked slowly away down the hall, her heels echoing farther and farther, leaving an echo that faded like the murmur of the stream.

Her anguished expression lingered a moment, as though it too wished to be drawn beside the map. She was sad, I was convinced, that I insisted on mapping every bend and every stone with such precision. Only that way would I find the truth sunk beneath the current.

I knew something, or so I believed then, that the adults preferred to ignore, filing away a case in incomplete police reports. But behind my back, Inspector Zuluaga had already confirmed my report, identifying the killer as Humberto Gil Bustamante, a thief posing as a guerrilla, or a guerrilla posing as a thief, suspected of having set off the 1970 Afianca tower fire, an amnestied ex-convict.

I then wondered whether the killer hadn't confused me with his victim. What had Eliseo thought in the moment of his death? And afterward? Had he found eternal peace? Wasn't it better to die a child than to sin as an adult and be condemned to the torments of Hell? Wasn't that film we'd watched an announcement of horrors yet to come?

My father, despite past setbacks—losses from failed businesses, sleepless nights counting coins—had managed to stabilize his finances thanks to the sale of educational books and life insurance. Music returned to the house: records of Julio Jaramillo's melancholic boleros and Chavela Vargas's sentimental rancheras played on the powerful record player my mother spun

every day, carefully lowering the arm so as not to scratch the vinyl of the long-playing records. The arguments had lessened thanks to my parents' renewed marriage vows, and the atmosphere of constant threat—the one that had dominated the house during their work crises, with muffled shouts and slamming doors—gave way to a precarious calm, like a truce signed by old rivals at a farm in Piedecuesta.

One afternoon, while my father reviewed his commission notebook under a desk lamp's light, jotting figures with a chewed pencil, he said, with an unexpected air of resolution:

"This June, we're going to Cali."

The news filled me instantly with excitement. I already knew the sea, but the great cities of southwestern Colombia were as remote as France. I imagined Cali, from what we used to watch on television, whose roads seemed dusted with the fine sugar spilled from trucks hauling sugarcane from the Valley's mills, and its warm breeze was thick with salsa music, its endless avenues lined with carefully preserved limousines from the forties, from the height of the Valle's aristocratic families' splendor, all paradoxically descended from the swineherd Sebastián de Belalcázar, gleaming like metallic catfish beneath the tropical sun; a metropolis of rhythms and colors quite different from the solemn mountains east of Bucaramanga.

We left the morning of June 15th, with four suitcases bulging with light clothing and anticipatory souvenirs, for the Real de Minas Airport, a modest building with runways flanked by green hills. My father

sat with me on one side of the plane, an Aces DC-9 that smelled of fuel and vinyl seats, while my mother and sister took the left side, chatting quietly about what we'd see. During the flight, I became the favorite of a Spanish flight attendant, her blond hair pulled into a perfect bun, her uniform a fitted blue, who stroked my cheeks with soft fingers and served me all the ice cream I wanted, creamy vanilla in plastic cups. She then told me I reminded her of her little brother, lost in Madrid. This time she kissed my forehead and hugged me with maternal warmth. My father watched us with a smile, but his gaze inadvertently drifted to that diva's neckline, drawn by its subtle slope.

"What's over there, Papá?" I asked.

In a gallant gesture, he pointed to a hill visible from the window, remarking with an expert, gravelly voice:

"Over there, there's still gold, buried in the old mines, but only those who know—engineers with connections—get to steal it."

The flight attendant laughed with a sweet, musical cadence, telling him what a charming boy he had.

"He's got the gaze of a basilisk," my mother cut in sourly, staking out her territory with a tense smile that failed to conceal her jealousy.

The flight attendant frowned.

"A basilisk?"

"In mythology, it was a monster that could paralyze its victims with a single glance," my mother

replied without taking her eyes off my father. "If I were you, I'd be careful."

The flight attendant caught the tone and, with a courteous farewell smile, withdrew toward the back of the plane, swaying her hips to the flight's rhythm.

We arrived at Cali's airport ninety minutes later, a bustle of rolling suitcases and Valle-accented voices. We were welcomed by cousin Gonzago, the family's go-to lawyer, a man with a thick moustache and an impeccable suit, who introduced us to his latest girlfriend, a Valle celebrity model with long legs and a flirtatious laugh. He drove us in his new lime-green Renault 4, a compact car that cruised freely down the city's avenues, until we arrived at his mother's house, Aunt Azucena, who, oh, what a delight!, owned a neighborhood shop that sold, among dried grains, cleaning supplies, and fresh fruit, comics from the Cinco and Novaro publishing houses: *Susy, Secrets of the Heart*, with its teenage romances and sentimental dramas; *Salt and Pepper*, chronicles of babies' mischief; *Super Mouse*, the epic adventures of a mouse who humiliated his feline bullies; *Periquita*, the mischievous girl with her everyday antics; and dark-humor classics of neighborhood life like *The Fox and the Crow*, or *Tom and Jerry*, with their bitter lessons of coexistence disguised as children's comedy.

My aunt, a robust woman with a flour-stained apron and kind eyes, hit it off with me right away. When she asked how I was doing with my math, I told her perfectly well, reciting the nine times table from memory. So she taught me how to help her customers:

weighing rice on the old scale, wrapping candy in newspaper, making exact change.

For fifteen days, I spent the mornings of that vacation helping her customers—noisy neighbors, children with bags of coins—and reading the comics we sold, devouring pages under the counter while the sun warmed the shop.

In the afternoons, our parents first took us to lunch, following the Colombian protocol of treating one's hosts to the city's best restaurants in exchange for their hospitality. When cousin Gonzago wasn't picking us up in his Renault 4, we took two taxis with Aunt Azucena and the three cousins who filled her five-bedroom house with her: two boys and a teenage girl, twice our age.

In the afternoon we went to Cali's museums and beautiful sites: the Museum of Modern Art with its abstract paintings that confused me, the Zoo with its shrieking monkeys and lazy jaguars, the Cali River with its curved bridges.

It was then that I first saw the beautiful country house of Jorge Isaacs's *María*, an old colonial homestead surrounded by palms and sugarcane, where the air smelled of jasmine and romantic history. My parents bought the novel at a nearby bookshop, a leather-bound volume with an illustrated cover. I devoured it in three days, falling in love with that beautiful lady condemned, alas, what sorrow!, to a premature and romantic death, comforted only by the sincere promise of reunion in eternal life. I walked across those green meadows, settings that, once I read

María, I would go on to populate with jaguars lurking in the underbrush, foul-smelling peasants with machetes, doctors with leather bags, and tears shed beneath the Valle moon.

One night a Mercedes came to pick us up, a luxury car purring like a cat, and took us to the mansion of Uncle David, the very one Uncle Sartorio had mistakenly waited for in Barranquilla, years before. A prosperous doctor and man of the world, Uncle David treated us to creamy milkshakes his housekeeper, neatly uniformed in white with a starched apron, served us at his mansion in the El Peñón neighborhood, a white palace with Italian marble floors gleaming like mirrors and a garden where purple orchids bloomed in imported ceramic pots.

I had never seen a bathroom with instant hot water, fiberglass partitions printed with floral patterns, nor a dining table set with six different pieces of cutlery per person: salad forks, meat knives, soup spoons, all silver and gleaming.

I delighted in studying the exclusive appliances and provisions available in Colombia in 1976: a General Electric refrigerator with a separate freezer, an Oster blender that pulverized fruit in seconds, an Amana microwave oven that heated food in minutes—a magical novelty—a color Sony television showing programs in vivid tones, and provisions like imported Nestlé chocolates, Spanish serrano hams, dusty bottles of Chilean wine, and creamy Dutch cheeses, all luxuries that contrasted with our simple life in Bucaramanga.

My uncle received us with a distant kindness, a tall man with grey hair combed back. He wore white linen guayaberas and spoke in a learned tone, peppered with French phrases like "c'est la vie" or "bon appétit." He had made his fortune with an ointment he had invented himself—"Sant-André Ointment, tissue regenerator"—a miracle paste that healed wounds and regenerated gums, and which enjoyed great prestige among the Valle's traditional families, who sought him out at his private clinic.

That night, over dinner served on fine porcelain plates, he spoke of his travels in an unhurried voice. He named countries I only knew from *Kalimán*, Jules Verne, or the magazine *Duda*: Egypt with its ancient pyramids, Greece with its ruined temples, Turkey with its spice-scented bazaars.

"In Cairo, nephew," he told me, turning to me with a raised eyebrow, "the beggars sleep at the foot of the pyramids, beneath stars that have watched empires fall."

I seized the chance to jump in, my voice pouring out in an enthusiastic torrent:

"The Great Pyramid has a base of 230 meters and a height of 146," I said, without breathing, reciting memorized facts, "and if you multiply its perimeter by 43,200, you get the exact circumference of the Earth. It's a mathematical monument."

There was a stunned silence. My uncle raised his eyebrows and then laughed, pleased, slapping the table in approval.

"Extraordinary!" he exclaimed. "Where did you learn that, boy?"

"In the magazine *Duda*, Uncle. And in library books."

"Ah, then you're a genius whose curiosity goes beyond what schools teach. Bravo."

My mother looked at me with radiant pride, her eyes shining; my father, with genuine astonishment, as though seeing me for the first time. It was the first time anyone in the family had spoken my name with academic respect.

The next morning, my father and uncle shut themselves away in the study, a room lined with medical books and framed diplomas. They talked business, raw materials for the ointment, territorial exclusivity for its distribution. My uncle offered to have him represent him in Bucaramanga, selling his ointment and other pharmaceutical products, promising steady profits and logistical support with weekly shipments.

But the next morning, another offer came along. A friend of my uncle's, a construction businessman with a thick moustache and a perpetual cigar, spoke to my father about an emerging business: aluminum window frames, a modern trade replacing the heavy, rusted iron of traditional windows. Aluminum—he said enthusiastically, gesturing—was the metal of the future: light as a feather, bright as silver, eternal against corrosion, ideal for the new houses going up in the suburbs.

My father hesitated, weighing the options in his mind. Between selling healing medicine or

manufacturing durable windows lay an abyss, but both paths offered financial independence, far from unpredictable commissions. He initially agreed to sell my uncle's miracle ointment.

Many years later, I pieced together, through journalistic research—interviews with distant relatives, dusty archives in Cali libraries, yellowed articles from *El Tiempo*—the story of the prodigious invention of my uncle David's paste, which generated impressive profits. My great-uncle belonged to the mid-century generation: quarrelsome, a drinker, a womanizer, his aunts' favorite. When my great-grandfather Pedro fell victim to morphine and abandoned his twelve children, after his wife's death, my great-great-aunts—Rosa and Frida—had devoted themselves to raising each of their nephews: among them my grandfather Jonás, Uncle David, Uncle Víctor, Uncle Sartorio, Aunt Petunia, Aunt Adela, Aunt Azucena, and the youngest, Jaime Saint-André.

Uncle David was sent to Bogotá to study dentistry. He had wanted to devote himself to law, but since Uncle Víctor, the eldest, was already studying to be a lawyer, he was told he couldn't, and he, though reluctant, obeyed, as younger brothers did in those days before the firstborn. Uncle David then settled on dentistry.

After graduating, following a common and well-regarded practice in the Colombia of the forties, he traveled from town to town as an itinerant dentist, from fair to fair, "to enjoy his youth," leaving girlfriends at every stop. Until once, at a fair in Charalá, he got

distracted lighting a kerosene lamp, which exploded in his face, badly burning him.

His aunts, with that year's harvest income from their farms, sent him to New York with a double purpose: to pursue a master's degree in dentistry, a novelty at the time, and to be operated on by the most famous plastic surgeon of the fifties in New York, Dr. Ivo Pitanguy, a pioneer of facial reconstruction and modern beauty, whose Manhattan clinic drew the world's elite in search of the perfection the war had denied them.

He came back with his face restored—not perfect, but with lively eyes and a slightly crooked mouth, giving him the air of an Italian film star. He kept drinking, until, at forty-two, he decided to reform and entered politics in Santander. He was elected as a departmental representative and founded the José Antonio Galán School and a library, acts still remembered in the annals of Charalá.

But he couldn't stay in his hometown because of his entanglements with women of the night. He rebuilt his life in Cali, opening a dental practice. No one came, despite newspaper advertising. So he distributed flyers at schools offering free diagnoses, with no obligation for treatment—a novel idea. His plan worked, and lines formed at his door, and, behind them, prosperity.

Celebrating, though, he fell back into drink. In one drunken night he invited a lost indigenous taxi driver in from the countryside, gave him food and drink. They ended up drunk for three days, waking up on the outskirts of Cali near a river. They became

friends. The taxi driver, in gratitude, shared an indigenous secret: plants that, ground up, regenerated dental tissue, cleaning cavities without the need for expensive treatments.

My uncle experimented with it in his laboratory until he managed to decipher its components and extract its chemical formula, creating a paste that became famous, especially in progressive nations like Norway and Japan, opposed by dentists in the USA and France who preferred costly treatments like root canals and crowns, a source of lucrative, quick profits. The paste regenerated tissue, preventing long, costly interventions.

My father, following his recent successes as a salesman, decided to bring it to Bucaramanga, but ran into the hostility of local dentists, who wanted no part of quick, cheap cures, preferring patients who depended on biweekly appointments. It wasn't about healing, but about keeping people sick, as one of them told him, fed up with his calls. So my father decided to accept the aluminum-window business instead. He called Uncle David in August and asked whether he could put him in touch with the window seller. He said no, that he'd already committed to another partner in Manizales, but told him to contact a certain Cándido in Bucaramanga, who was offering 25% of his fledgling aluminum-and-fiberglass partitions company, *Divisiones del Oriente*.

He turned, as he rarely did, to the family's mystical advice. Back in Bucaramanga, we visited my Aunt Adela, a devoted spiritist, who invited him to a séance at her house full of funerary decor, where her

husband's remains rested in a black urn at the center of her living room, a trophy of an ancient spiritual battle.

I remember the atmosphere of that room clearly: the air thick with sandalwood incense that stung the nose, the closed red velvet curtains blocking out the daylight, the round table covered with a cloth embroidered with sun and moon symbols. My aunt held a crystal pendulum over a cup of clear water and murmured prayers in Latin mixed with Spanish. Beside her, my mother watched with superstitious respect, crossing herself. I, hidden behind the half-open door, listened to every word, my heart racing.

"Spirits of light, guide the path of David Saint-André," my aunt invoked, her voice trembling.

The pendulum moved slowly, first to the right in wide circles, then forward in a straight line.

"The spirits say," she announced solemnly, interpreting the movement, "that his destiny lies in carpentry, like that of Joseph, father of Jesus."

My father frowned, confused.

"Carpentry? Back to wood?"

"Yes, but not of wood," she clarified, consulting the pendulum again. "Of noble metal. Aluminum is the new wood of the century, light and eternal."

My mother nodded, relieved. To her, any sign promising stability was welcome, a refuge in the current of those months of uncertainty.

The next day, my father backed out of the pharmaceutical venture with my uncle, who had already grown used to the idea that no one is a prophet in their

own land, and agreed to invest in the aluminum carpentry business.

We came back to Bucaramanga at the end of June; the return trip was different: my father spoke little, absorbed in mental calculations of measurements and budgets, dreaming of aluminum profiles. I counted the clouds from the window, flirting with the flight attendants, who responded with affectionate smiles and extra treats.

A month later, my father met with Don Cándido and Germinio, his third partner, and bought 25% of *Divisiones del Oriente*. The company had until then limited itself to making bathroom partitions, but their plan was to expand into aluminum windows and doors. To that end, my father took courses at SENA, where experts from Cali and Bogotá taught classes on extrusion and anodizing.

Their shop was on Calle 61, in the hardware district, below what had once been the red-light zone of the sixties, something that still raised the eyebrows of the city's high society. My father took a course on mixing patterns with chemicals for fiberglass sheets. Clientele was scarce, and the two employees passed their hours idle.

"Let's start by doing the bathroom partitions at my house," he said, snapping them out of their lethargy.

They complained to Cándido and Germinio, and that afternoon they met, demanding payment in advance.

"Understand, I'm doing this to use my own bathrooms as a showcase," he said, signing a check. "I

know my neighbors in El Diamante II will buy their partitions from us right away. They're sick of mopping the floor every time they shower with plastic curtains dividing the toilet, the sink, and the bidet."

"This check doesn't cover the cost," Germinio protested.

"Isn't it at cost price for us?" my father replied.

Don Cándido waited, and Germinio exploded:

"You know what, David? If you want to make the decisions, I'll sell you my share."

My father opened his checkbook again.

"Tomorrow's too late."

That is how, in his first month as a minority partner, my father became the owner of half the business.

The first few weeks were hard: neighbors and relatives visited our house to see the gleaming partitions, but at first no one bought. Little by little, though, the idea caught on. Within a few months, no respectable house used plastic curtains anymore. His company began getting orders from new housing developments, and his name started to circulate among builders, bringing in contracts that filled the workshop with noise and sparks.

That same day of our trip to Cali, at the García Cadena Viaduct, Inspector Zuluaga patrolled in his Jeep Willys, and stopped in front of our house, scanning the abyss with binoculars.

Desolate, the bridge shook in the wind.

He saw Agent Rivera approaching; his impeccable uniform stood out against the grey concrete.

Something about his thick moustache and aviator glasses reminded him of the cover of a German band's record already appearing in the newspapers.

"New, agent?" Zuluaga greeted him, lighting a Pielroja cigarette. "You look like you stepped off the cover of a Village People album."

Rivera nodded, his voice neutral.

"Transferred from Bogotá, Inspector. Watching the perimeter. And you?"

Zuluaga studied him, exhaling smoke.

"That so-called suicide of Bustamante's. It was fake, you know? Clean nails, mismatched clothes. Where's he hiding? The teachers' union keeps asking me: did he kill that child out of depravity, or political revenge?"

"López didn't align with the USSR," Rivera said, looking at the abyss, "that's what they say."

"Rumors. His real name was Humberto Gil Bustamante, tried for robbery and murder, released and hired by the very government that granted him amnesty."

"So he was a professional with a backup plan? He must be running, then."

"Right. Those from the mountains don't forgive betrayal."

Rivera said goodbye and walked off, limping slightly. Zuluaga noticed something ambiguous in it, and wanted to ask him how he'd passed the admission exam with that impairment, but preferred to assume he was the protégé of some influential politician with a weakness for dark glasses and thick moustaches.

Eliseo's burial took place during our trip to Cali, on a grey morning in June 1976, when Bucaramanga's sky seemed to weep for the prodigy child whose life had been cut short so absurdly and cruelly. The Central Cemetery, a vast field of weathered crosses and moss-covered stone mausoleums, filled with a crowd reflecting the city's collective shock. Local politicians, in dark, heavy wool suits and poorly knotted ties, mixed among the people like figures in a somber painting, their faces feigning a solemnity that hid electoral calculations.

Teachers from every educational institution—from the Dámaso Zapata Technical Institute to Colegio San Pedro Claver—arrived in groups, in threadbare jackets, folders under their arms, their expressions marked by disbelief and grief, paying tribute to Eliseo, the symbol of a middle-class generation that had hoped for rewards for high grades: scholarships, prizes, a future among the privileged at the Club del Cañón that never came.

Students of every kind crowded the gravel path. From primary-school children in rumpled uniforms to defiant-eyed high schoolers, all whispered about the tragedy that had shaken Bucaramanga.

But rumors spread like poison through the crowd. Some murmured that Eliseo hadn't deserved his place of honor, that his grades had been inflated through favoritism, or that his selection for a state educational program had been just one more bureaucratic error in a chain of corruption. This caused a palpable shock in the community, gathering in small circles beneath the mango trees lining the path to the

cemetery, exchanging disbelieving glances. How was it possible that a boy from a modest family, destined for luxuries and opportunities, had fallen into the hands of a serial killer hired by the Ministry of Education itself?

The local papers, like *Flanco Conservador* and *La Crónica*, milked every gruesome detail. According to them, the hire had been an "administrative error," motivated by President Alfonso López Michelsen's sympathies toward dangerous guerrillas—from the M-19 or the ELN—who sowed terror, death, kidnappings, and displacement in rural areas. The president, with his diplomatic bearing, avoided direct comment in his radio addresses, limiting himself to vague expressions of "deep regret."

The Minister of Education, in a hastily called press conference, admitted the error, but insisted the killer had taken his own life, throwing himself, "victim of guilt," from the García Cadena Viaduct.

But already the tabloid paper *El Soplón* was reporting that Inspector Zuluaga, a police veteran with a thick moustache and a scar on his left cheek from a shootout in the eastern plains, had uncovered the truth: the body recovered at the foot of the Viaduct was not the killer's. It was a decoy, a fake body—that of a well-known truck thief betrayed by one of his own accomplices—dressed with skillfully forged documents, freshly printed with his fingerprints. The clean nails, the mismatched clothing, the absence of injuries consistent with a fatal fall: it had all been staged to simulate the wounds of the drop.

"We're dealing with a professional," Zuluaga confided to a colleague, in a report leaked to the press, feeding the paranoia in the neighborhoods. "A criminal who acts in cold blood."

Teachers, gathered in school courtyards during recess, debated fervently:

"What interest did they have in killing him?" they asked, referring both to Eliseo and to the killer himself.

Theories abounded. Some spoke of pure depravity: a sick man, hired by mistake to "educate" children, but driven by dark impulses, eliminated to clean up the ministry's image. Others, more cynical, pointed to internal political vendettas, bureaucratic feuds in which the killer knew too much about the government's "mistakes." And there were those who looked to the broader Cold War stage: López Michelsen, reluctant to declare a full alliance with the USSR despite his previous ties as Minister of Foreign Affairs, had irritated radical sectors. Was the killer a pawn in that game, an infiltrated terrorist, or hired to destabilize things and then "suicided" to avoid a trial that might expose names? Teachers cited articles from *El Tiempo* hinting at ELN infiltration, while the Viaduct became a symbol of secrets buried beneath the concrete.

In the middle of the procession to the Central Cemetery, along Carrera 27, flanked by colonial buildings and vendors silenced out of respect, no one noticed the new officer patrolling the edges. He was a tall, sturdy man, in an impeccable uniform—metallic

white helmet, green trousers with white belts, short-sleeved shirt with gleaming insignia, and dark aviator glasses hiding his eyes. His badge identified him as "Officer Rivera," a recent transfer from Bogotá, according to the commissioner. His slight limp and hunched posture made him look older, but no one questioned his presence: police officers were invisible at events like this, silent guardians who heard everything.

In truth, he was a professional in deception, infiltrated with a perfect disguise: hair dyed grey at the temples, dental prosthetics altering his jaw, makeup simulating deep wrinkles. His mission wasn't to keep order, but to listen.

He approached a group of Ministry of Education officials, old colleagues who had approved his hiring as "pedagogical advisor." They spoke in low voices, sweating in the heat, as the procession moved forward.

"This is a disaster," one whispered, a balding bureaucrat with thick glasses, wiping his brow. "The minister says it was a mistake, but we all know the guy was recommended from above. Sympathies with those from the mountains, understand? López wants to negotiate with the guerrillas, and this one had ties to the ELN."

"Now the press is crucifying us," another answered, thin, with a thin moustache. "Hiring a murderer to 'educate' children. And the suicide, how convenient. If he talked, names would come out, Ramón, including yours."

The third, young and nervous, looked around.

"Quiet. There are ears everywhere. Eliseo wasn't the target. There are rumors he mixed up his victim. He wanted a teacher, something personal, not political."

Agent Rivera, pretending to adjust his radio, caught every word.

He felt the blood rush to his head. A telegram from Bogotá had warned him: the boy from the Anexa who had placed third in academic excellence in first grade in 1975 was the bastard son of Luis Nieto, Matías's grandson, the thieves who, after a shared heist, had swindled him out of his share and abandoned him, sending him to prison for five years.

Those bureaucrats confirmed that his true target was Marco Saint-André—me—now in Cali, unaware of the danger.

Rivera scanned the crowd: he expected to see the deceased's relatives, but Matías, the burly taxi driver, wasn't there; nor was Luis, his cold-eyed son. He approached a teacher from the Anexa, feigning official concern.

"Excuse me, ma'am…"

"I'm Teacher Teresa, officer."

"Thank you… Do you know the family of the boy who placed third in first-grade grades?"

Teresa looked left and right.

"I don't see the Saint-Andrés…"

"Saint-André? I mean the Cardona family."

"Oh!" Miss Teresa exclaimed, explaining with a friendly smile what had happened: my expulsion, and my replacement.

"You could ask about the Saint-Andrés at the teachers' office at the Rufino José Cuervo School," she said, as she took her leave.

Rivera approached Teacher Sara.

"Saint-André? Marco? I don't see them."

"Were they on the outing, representing the Rufino José Cuervo School?"

"They're in Cali, officer," Sara answered, clutching her rosary. "A shame, Marco had been Eliseo's classmate, poor thing."

Rivera memorized the information, weighing his revenge: kill the grandson, blood of his enemies, or go straight for Matías and Luis, whose address he had obtained through his UIS comrades: a house in a squatter settlement to the north, where they reigned as masters?

That same day, after the burial, Agent Rivera disappeared; his colleagues searched the city for him for three days.

"Where's Rivera?" a sergeant named Sánchez asked. "He was supposed to patrol with me and he vanished."

"Maybe you offended him," another answered, with an ironic smile.

The mystery turned into scandal when they confirmed that neither his family contacts nor his address were real, and that, unusually, neither the secretary nor his assistants had bothered to verify them. Inspector Zuluaga, learning of what had happened, questioned his coworkers, finally concluding they were dealing with a dangerous terrorist, whose height

matched that of Humberto Gil Bustamante. How had he failed to identify him in their conversation at the Diamante? His own cold blood chilled him now.

My semester of punishment had ended, and I spent the fifteen days of vacation I had left in the El Diamante II neighborhood, reconnecting with friends: Sergio, Hortensio, Abhad, Colato, William, Diego, René, Gino, and César. We played until eight, taking advantage of my parents' happiness over the prosperity of "Divisiones del Oriente." We started with "the mother," a local chasing game where, like in zombie movies, whoever was "the mother" turned into the pursuer of whoever they touched.

Sergio, cunning, was the one who counted in "the kicked ball." While we hid, if the seeker wandered off, we'd come out and kick the ball to force him to go retrieve it, a moment we used to change hiding spots.

Hortensio once fell off the roof onto our house's grass, well-cushioned, which later gave us ideas about jumping off it ourselves, until Doña Adriana caught us and scolded us.

Abhad taught us his version of baseball, and we immediately organized two teams. William turned out to be a first-rate pitcher, and the truth is he hit the ball far when batting too. Diego ended that fun when he broke the window of Don Ernesto's shop, who came out roaring that we should all chip in to pay for new glass, a task my father took on in the absence of other volunteers, which earned me another punishment, this time only half a day.

René whispered dirty jokes, and was already showing signs of becoming the neighborhood gossip, pointing out which women in the neighborhood let men into their houses when their husbands were away; Colato ruled the afternoons with plastic action figures, and Gino commentated every soccer match like a sportscaster, already showing signs of his future career as a singer in the choral group "Pentateuco."

Card games with "mazotes" brought laughter and red hands; Sergio always won.

Before school, we played "shooters" (or "picklocks," as we called them), firing wire pellets from slingshots, aiming at each other's bodies out of some code of ethics. One grazed Gino, who shouted "This is war!," but we kept playing, adrenaline pumping.

One afternoon my mother, radiant, announced her pregnancy.

"You're going to have a little brother!"

Adelia and I hugged her, celebrating under the stars with sodas.

It was then that I saw that officer with the thick moustache approaching the house, and by his movements, despite his limp, I knew he was the terrorist plaguing my world: Humberto Bustamante, the supposed bureaucrat declared a suicide by the local crime reporters.

I shouted to my sister Gabriela.

"Get inside! Chinita! Get inside!"

Matías's Ford taxi screeched around the corner just then, and from its black-and-white checkered

bodywork I saw Luis and Asdrúbal pull out pistols through the windows.

Chapter 12. Providential Chance

It would be a starry September night in Bucaramanga, a humid evening when the air blowing over its antediluvian plateaus felt cool and charged with promise, with the distant chirp of crickets in the nearby pastures and the occasional echo of a car speeding across the Viaduct, visible from our rooftop.

The sun's faint forge was already melting over Palonegro, the city's western watchtower, tinting the plateau and the eastern hills orange and purple. For most of the city, it was the hour of last-minute shopping, of heading home. For Humberto Gil Bustamante, now assuming the identity of Agent Rivera, it was the hour of vengeance.

His plan had been flawless. Infiltrated into the police force, he had gained access to the files, had followed the trail. He knew that Matías, the burly taxi driver who had betrayed him years before in the Banco de Santander robbery, lived with his son Luis in a squatter settlement to the north, a tangle of unpaved streets near Cerro de La Cruz.

He shed his uniform in the back room of an accomplice's workshop, pulling on black coveralls and a leather jacket. His weapon, a 9mm Browning HP, hung cold against his side.

He parked his Triumph Bonneville motorcycle a hundred meters from the neighborhood's main entrance, a discreet spot overlooking the only access

road. He advanced on foot, with the icy gaze of a predator. But the neighborhood, like a living organism, had its own antibodies.

Asdrúbal, Luis's close friend—a wiry guy with a crooked smile and bulletproof loyalty—was posted at the corner of the "La Providencia" shop, drinking a malt soda. He had seen blurry photographs in *El Soplón* of the man hunting them. When he saw the tall, thin silhouette, the hunched posture trying to hide itself, and above all, the intensity of that gaze scanning every face, he recognized him instantly. Before he could even weigh his hunch, a jolt of pure adrenaline hit him.

Without losing a second, Asdrúbal slipped inside the shop. For a coin, a barefoot boy shot off like a greyhound toward Matías's house, a zinc-and-brick shack at the end of a dusty street. The message was brief and lethal:

"He's here! The one from the photos!"

Inside the house, the world stopped. Matías, his calloused hands still smelling of gasoline, and Luis, the scar on his cheek going pale, exchanged a look that held years of paranoia. There were no words. It was pure survival instinct. They grabbed their own pistols, old Colt .38s, and went out through the back door, running toward where they had the taxi parked in a side alley. It wasn't just any car; it was their weapon, their mobile fortress: a 1971 Ford Custom 500, a long-hooded, checker-patterned colossus of a sedan, painted in the black-and-white livery of "Taxis Magallanes." They picked up a panting Asdrúbal, and the Ford's V8 engine roared with a dull power no other car in Bucaramanga

could have matched, spitting out of the alley toward the neighborhood's exit.

At the corner, Bustamante saw them. The black-and-white giant burst out like a kite in a storm, kicking up a cloud of reddish dust. A silent curse froze on his lips. There was no time for stealth. He spun on his heel and ran like an Olympic athlete toward his Triumph. The bike started with a sharp roar. The hunt had begun: the agile, modern English motorcycle against the American mastodon of the seventies.

The Ford tore downhill with a dull roar. Matías gripped the wheel with white knuckles, knowing every pothole in those streets like the lines of his own hand. Beside him, Luis loaded the Colt .38 with trembling hands. Asdrúbal, in the back seat, watched the rearview mirror.

"Here he comes!" he shouted.

The Triumph Bonneville appeared behind them like a furious insect, its single headlight cutting through the evening gloom. Bustamante rode it hunched over the handlebars, the Browning already in his free hand.

They took Carrera 15 at full speed. The Ford took up almost the entire lane, its chrome fenders grazing the mirrors of Renault 4s that swerved away with hysterical honking.

The first shot rang out as they turned onto Bulevar Bolívar.

The bullet ricocheted off the rear bumper with a metallic *pang!* Luis leaned half his body out the passenger window and returned fire. The blasts mixed

with the clamor of car horns. Pedestrians dove to the ground. A fruit vendor's cart overturned.

Bustamante fired again. The bullet went through the rear window, raining glass down on Asdrúbal.

"Damn it!" he roared, firing blindly through the hole.

They reached the Mesón de los Búcaros intersection. Matías didn't brake. He used the Ford's weight like a battering ram, plowing through the roundabout while smaller cars scattered like dominoes. Behind them, a tanker truck crashed into a light post, momentarily blocking the way.

Bustamante swerved the motorcycle onto the sidewalk, riding up it amid terrified screams, and resumed the chase.

"We're not losing him!" Luis muttered, reloading.

They turned sharply onto Carrera 27. The taxi zigzagged through traffic, its black-and-white colors making it a perfect target under the dusk lights. Matías dodged two Copetrán buses by inches, the screech of tires mixing with the drivers' curses.

That was when the Clausen Brewery truck blocked the way.

The huge delivery vehicle was pulling out of a warehouse, taking up the whole street with its slow, clumsy maneuver. Matías accelerated, trying to squeeze through the gap between the truck and the sidewalk. The Ford scraped its white side against the truck's metal with a jarring screech that threw off sparks.

But it got through.

Bustamante didn't have the same luck. He braked too late. The Triumph skidded, spun sideways, and crashed into the truck's rear bumper. The impact threw him onto the asphalt. The motorcycle lay there, leaking gasoline.

Matías watched the scene in the rearview mirror and let out a hoarse laugh.

"We lost him!"

But he didn't slow down. He drove the Ford into a labyrinth of side streets in Sotomayor, turned off the headlights, and stopped in the gloom of a dead-end alley, next to a closed garage.

Only the rumble of the overheated engine and their ragged breathing filled the silence.

"Damn it!" Luis spat, pounding the dashboard. "That bastard found us! But how?"

Matías turned toward him, his eyes bloodshot.

"The trip. The only thread was that damned trip to the Club del Cañón."

Asdrúbal leaned in from the back, grasping the poisoned thread.

"Bustamante and the kid… the only two who were there for three days."

"And the only two who came out alive," Luis hissed. "They left Bustamante for dead, but that was fake. And the student… nothing happened to the kid. Not a scratch."

A heavy silence fell over the car. The idea, monstrous and plausible, began to grow among them like a poisonous plant.

"Three days together," Matías murmured, gripping the wheel. "Plenty of time to loosen a tongue. To tell, in campfire confessions, that some 'old colleagues' of his father were threatening him. Maybe he even met his father and realized the two of them are like two peas in a pod."

"I don't believe it!" Asdrúbal nodded. "Look how clean the Eliseo thing was, how… convincing. Bustamante killed the wrong kid and cooked up his own suicide on top of it."

"Quite the theater!" Matías insisted. "Or it was after that that he put it together. He learned we'd lied to him with the telegrams, that the boy he had in front of him for three days and never touched wasn't your bastard son, Luis."

"And now…?" Luis snapped. "Now they must be working together with that David, the one who fired you. He's the one feeding him information!"

"You're delirious."

"I told you to stop seeing your old colleagues from the land registry office!" Luis grumbled bitterly.

"Gil's the one being manipulated by Saint-André now," Asdrúbal grumbled, "not by us."

"And it's all because of your plan!" Matías pointed his finger at Luis. "That's why he came straight for us today!"

"That damned kid sold us out," Luis concluded, his voice a thread of resentment. "He ratted us out on that trip, and now he's sent death right to our door."

"We have to finish him off!" Asdrúbal shrieked, reloading his pistol.

"The game's over," Matías declared, his voice like ice. "We're going to El Diamante. Now."

"Once and for all," Luis nodded, biting his lips in contained fury.

The Ford pulled out of the alley and merged back into traffic. But they weren't fleeing anymore.

Now they were hunting.

Meanwhile, fifty meters from the brewery truck, Bustamante got up with a roar of pain and fury. His elbow bled, his uniform was torn, but his eyes remained a predator's.

The Triumph's handlebars were bent. Useless.

Then he saw, stopped at the nearby traffic light, a Suzuki 125 with a long-haired young man in a denim vest. The kid looked at him with a mocking smile, enjoying the spectacle of the fallen "policeman."

Bustamante ran toward him. He shoved him off with a brutal push that sent him sprawling onto the asphalt. He mounted the motorcycle.

"Hey, that's my bike!" the young man shouted, getting up.

Bustamante answered with a shot that whistled past his ear. The boy threw himself to the ground, hands over his head, crying out apologies.

The Suzuki started with a steady, growing purr.

Bustamante sped down Calle 36, scanning every corner. The Ford was too conspicuous to hide. Black and white, huge, damaged. It had to be nearby.

On Avenida González Valencia, he saw the silhouette of a taxi from the same company turning toward Cabecera. He gunned the engine. He caught up

to the vehicle at a traffic light and looked through the window.

Three elderly people stared back at him, puzzled, wondering what violation they'd committed.

Bustamante cursed under his breath. He drove several more blocks before stopping at a corner, panting. Sweat soaked his fake police shirt.

The colossus had slipped away.

Then, like a bolt of lightning, he returned to his original purpose. The vengeance wasn't only against the traitors. It was against his own blood.

The true target wasn't Eliseo. It was Marco Saint-André. Luis's secret son. Matías's grandson.

He sped toward the Viaduct. His breathing steadied. Blind fury turned into glacial determination.

He'd gotten the address from a stork-faced teacher during his inquiries at the Normal School for Young Ladies.

He turned the Suzuki toward the El Diamante II neighborhood.

Dusk in El Diamante II passed placidly, or so it seemed, the lights of neighboring houses flickering like sleepy eyes behind curtains. My sister Gabriela, Adelia, and I were in the back courtyard, celebrating the news of my mother's pregnancy with cola sodas and cookies Matilde had baked that afternoon. The sky was a black tapestry dotted with stars, and for a moment, everything seemed perfect: the prosperity of *Divisiones del Oriente*, my parents' reconciliation after the Marriage Encounter, and now this new life on the way. We laughed quietly, imagining names for the baby—

Cándido if it was a boy, like my grandfather; Cristina if it was a girl, after the Savior—when a strange sound broke the stillness: heavy footsteps on the sidewalk, a subtle but unmistakable limp, as though someone were slightly dragging their left foot over the uneven pavement, producing a dry scrape that mixed with the night wind.

I turned toward the street, my heart racing for no apparent reason, a pulse pounding at my temples like a distant drum. There, emerging from the shadows cast by the corner streetlamp—a yellowish, flickering light that seemed about to go out—came a man in a police uniform. His cap pulled low over his brow, aviator glasses hiding his eyes even in the dim light, and a thick moustache that looked fake, hastily glued beneath his hawk-like nose. He walked with determination, but his limp made him look vulnerable, almost pathetic, like a forgotten actor in some neighborhood play. Even so, something about his posture—the way his right hand brushed the holster on his hip, his fingers flexing slightly like claws ready to strike—chilled my blood. I recognized him at once: it was the same man I had seen in the rain that stormy night, the *Horror Fair* host made flesh, the killer lurking in the ravines like a ghost from old political wars.

Humberto Gil Bustamante, as we would later learn, disguised as Agent Rivera. His presence wasn't accidental; he'd come for me, Matías's kin, target of that vengeance against my father he dragged along like an invisible chain, forged in damp prisons.

The air thickened suddenly, charged with a metallic smell, like blood and ozone, that reminded me of past storms. Chinita stopped laughing, her hand freezing around her glass of soda, condensation droplets sliding down the glass like cold tears.

"What's wrong, Marco?" she whispered, but her voice was lost in the wind.

The "policeman" stopped a few meters from the courtyard gate, his silhouette cut against the darkness, the streetlamp casting long shadows that stretched toward us like accusing fingers. He drew his revolver with a fluid motion, the metal gleaming under the moon like a sharp tooth in a wolf's mouth. He aimed directly at me, his index finger tightening on the trigger with a deliberate slowness, as though he savored the suspense, the terror building in my chest like a ball of lead.

Time slowed: I could see the sweat beading on his forehead despite the cool of the night, the nervous tic in his jaw making the fake moustache tremble, the pure hatred in those black eyes that now, without the glasses, looked like wet coals, absorbing the starlight.

The show never ends, I thought, remembering his cavernous voice from that terrifying film, an echo reverberating in my mind like a curse. He was going to shoot, to finish me off as he had done with Pepito and Eliseo, dragging my body to some stream so the water could carry it off like a forgotten secret, floating among rocks and wilted leaves.

Dying can't be so bad, I told myself, thinking of Mato and the vast fields the Lord would prepare for me, for my good intentions, because, yes, despite being a

boy with a two in conduct, I had never once wished harm on anyone.

But at that precise instant, a screech of tires tore through the night like a war cry. A black taxi, with the glossy black lettering of Taxis Magallanes—its freshly polished roof white, its doors reflecting the glare of the block's shining streetlights—turned the corner at full speed, its lights sweeping the street like furious eyes, briefly lighting up the neighboring houses' façades and casting dancing shadows.

I recognized Matías's taxi, the *chulavita* from that family of old grudges, the drunk driver fired from the government on my father's report, who had orchestrated this entire chaos of crossed vengeances, a born manipulator forged in the intrigues of the 1950s "Violence," when Conservatives and Liberals killed each other over political loyalties that were nothing but excuses for looting and personal hatreds.

Inside, at the side windows, two figures leaned out: Luis, Matías's son, his face twisted with rage, his eyes bloodshot, a fresh scar on his cheek from some recent fight; and Asdrúbal, his loyal accomplice, a stocky guy with scars from past brawls covering his arms like maps of lost battles, his breath reeking of cheap aguardiente even from a distance. Both were pulling revolvers out through the windows—rusted weapons, relics of failed heists—aiming directly at Chinita and at me, as I stood petrified in the courtyard, my feet rooted to the ground like tree roots.

The taxi braked sharply, its wheels skidding on asphalt slick with the night's dew, leaving black marks

like burns and kicking up a stench of burnt rubber mixing with exhaust smoke. The vehicle shuddered, its engine roaring like a wounded beast, and Luis was the first to act.

"That kid!" he growled, his hoarse voice cutting through the silence like a rusted knife, loaded with a resentment he didn't fully understand, but which he'd inherited from his father like a family curse. His revolver, a Colt .38 that looked pulled from some forgotten war, lined up with my chest, the barrel trembling slightly from adrenaline.

Asdrúbal, from the other side, aimed at Chinita, who was already at the door but still visible, her glass of soda falling to the ground and shattering into pieces that gleamed like fallen stars.

They were about to fire, to settle the blood debt they believed my family owed them, their old thefts, their betrayals in shared heists where Humberto had been ratted out and sent to prison for five years of hell, emerging now as a scheming, vengeful ghost. The suspense built: Luis's finger tightened on the trigger, Asdrúbal's mirrored it, and I could imagine the blast, the bullets cutting through the air, striking my soft flesh.

The "policeman"—Humberto—turned his head slightly, his survival instinct kicking in like a rusted but still lethal spring. He saw the enemy revolvers and, in a fraction of a second, understood the trap: it wasn't only vengeance against me, but a crossing of hatreds where he was the center, a pawn in Matías's game, used as a weapon against innocents.

Like in Clint Eastwood's Westerns, where his skill with the trigger was rewarded by crowds packing the Cine Colombia theaters for three showings a day, thrilling and applauding his sunset duels, bullets whistling across the desert, the false policeman raised his revolver with supernatural speed, fueled by the heat of the moment.

But Luis was faster this time: he fired first, his bullet striking Humberto's shoulder, tearing off a shred of uniform and flesh, a spray of blood splattering the courtyard gate like red paint on a black canvas.

Humberto screamed in pain, but didn't fall. Instead, he answered with surgical precision, his revolver spitting fire twice. The first shot rang out like thunder, a dry blast that rattled the neighboring houses' windows and woke the neighborhood dogs, who barked in chorus like an infernal choir. The bullet struck Luis's forehead, right between the eyes, with a precision only years of ravines and ambushes could forge. Luis's head snapped back, his body convulsing before hanging limp from the window, the revolver falling to the asphalt with a metallic clatter that rolled to a stop at my feet. Asdrúbal, stunned for an instant—his eyes widening in shock, his mouth forming a silent "no"—tried to react.

He swung his gun toward Humberto, but was too slow. Humberto's second shot caught him square in the temple, the bullet tearing through his skull with a spray of brain matter that splattered the inside of the taxi, staining the windshield and the driver's seat. Asdrúbal slumped outward, his body hanging

grotesquely from the open door, a dead weight rocking the vehicle.

Humberto kept firing. A bullet went through the rear door and grazed Matías's thigh, who screamed in pain but didn't let go of the wheel. Matías floored it while more bullets punched through the bodywork, leaving holes that whistled in the wind. The taxi swerved, and with the motion, Asdrúbal's body was pulled back inside while Luis's was thrown out, tumbling grotesquely across the asphalt as they rounded the corner. A trail of blood—Luis's, Asdrúbal's, Matías's—marked the Ford's path like a scarlet signature. The engine roared, and Matías vanished into the dusk, leaving behind a silence broken only by the echo of gunshots and distant barking.

Humberto swayed, blood pouring from his shoulder like a red river, but he didn't fall. Instead, he turned toward me, his still-smoking revolver aimed directly at my head, the barrel trembling slightly from pain but steady in its intent. His eyes locked onto mine, and in that moment, I knew he was going to kill me.

"You're Luis's bastard," he muttered through his teeth, his voice cavernous like the fair's host, loaded with years of resentment accumulated in prisons and ravines, a hatred that had turned him into a monster.

Why "bastard"? I wondered. Why was he offended, when I had always treated him with respect on that trip? His finger tightened on the trigger, the smoke from the barrel still rising in slow spirals, so close I could smell the gunpowder, feel the metal's residual

heat. My calm made him hesitate. I saw in his eyes his surprise at finding a boy who didn't fear death.

Then a heart-rending scream broke the spell. My mother came out with my father through the kitchen window, leaning out, her face pale with terror, her hands gripping the frame like claws.

"Murderer!" my father shouted, his booming voice drawing neighbors out of their houses, echoing beyond the corner and lighting up windows.

He saw in my father my own adult image, the same dark skin, the same eyes, the same nose, and understood his mistake at once: bullets, bodies, a policeman surrounded by the crowd, wounded but armed.

Humberto hesitated. Hadn't he read the telegrams about a supposed mistress?

His finger froze on the trigger, and for the first time, I saw a crack in his armor of hatred, a hesitation that humanized him for an instant, revealing the broken man behind the monster. Hearing my mother, seeing her genuine expression of horror—tears rolling down her cheeks, her voice broken with maternal fear—something melted in his mind.

I was no longer "the bastard son of Luis Nieto," Matías's grandson he'd sought to avenge his betrayal, his years in prison after being ratted out in a shared heist gone wrong. I was a decoy, an innocent piece in a web of manipulations Matías and Luis had woven to lure him in, using me as bait in their net of political and personal vengeance. His eyes narrowed, calculating coldly: killing an innocent child here, before witnesses,

would ruin his escape, would turn him into a visible fugitive in a city already hunting him. He lowered the revolver slowly, resuming his role as "policeman" with an acting skill worthy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, his limp now displayed like a well-practiced disguise.

"Are you all right?" he asked, in a calm, almost fatherly voice, holstering his weapon with a gesture that hid the pain of his wound. His fake moustache tilted slightly from sweat, but he adjusted it discreetly.

I opened my mouth to shout the truth—"It's him! It's Humberto Bustamante, the killer from the ravines!"—but the words caught in my throat like a knot of thorns. Panic had paralyzed me; my tongue felt heavy, swollen with terror, and all I could manage was a stifled moan.

Chinita, from the doorway, looked at me in terror, her hands trembling, but she said nothing either, her face pale as the moon.

My mother approached the gate with hesitant steps, her apron stained with flour from the cookies she'd baked that afternoon.

"Yes, of course… I don't know how to thank you. Thanks to you… I can't believe it," she stammered, her voice broken with relief and shock, reaching out a hand as though to touch him, then pulling it back at the sight of the blood on his shoulder.

She pinched my arm hard, a sharp jab that snapped me out of my trance like a bolt of lightning.

"Get inside, children!" she ordered, pushing us in with a maternal urgency that admitted no argument.

I wanted to protest, to scream that it was a trap, that this man was the killer in disguise, but the pinch made me react: I ran toward the house, dragging Chinita with me, our feet crunching over the broken glass fragments from the fallen cup, cracking underfoot like fragile bones. From the kitchen window, I peered out fearfully, my heart pounding like a runaway drum, my sweaty hands leaving prints on the glass fogged by my own breath. My mother was still outside, talking with him, thanking him as though he were a hero, gesturing with her hands as she described the shootout, her voice rising and falling in waves of emotion.

Humberto, ever skillful, pulled out his fake radio—an improvised device that looked real under the dim light—and pretended to call in a patrol:

"Reinforcements at Diamante II, shootout resolved, one suspect down. Wounded in the shoulder, but under control."

Then he moved a few meters away with an exaggerated limp, revealing a motorcycle hidden in the shadows of the almond tree in front of Guido and Berta's house, its engine still warm from the ride. He mounted it with agility and vanished into the night with a muffled roar, right as the sound of sirens approached from the corner.

I ran outside again, tripping over the threshold, shouting to the police officers arriving in their patrol car—a brand-new 1976 Chevrolet, black and white, blue and red lights flashing like enraged eyes:

"There's a policeman in disguise! He's a murderer! He's the one who killed this man, but this man wanted to kill us! It's revenge against my father!"

The officers, confused, got out of the vehicle with flashlights in hand, illuminating Luis's body on the ground—his horrified face frozen in *rictus mortis*, the bullet in his forehead like a third black eye—the trail of blood leading toward where the taxi had fled, and the shell casing still rolling on the sidewalk. They took notes in coffee-stained notebooks, asking questions in monotone voices, but their skepticism was palpable, like a veil of disbelief.

"A policeman in disguise," they murmured among themselves, exchanging glances, as though it were the delirious story of a child frightened by shadows.

Meanwhile, the real chaos continued in the shadows of the city, a thread of vengeance stretching like the bed of La Calavera, dredging up secrets and corpses.

Matías, at the wheel of the fleeing taxi, kept a cool head despite the pain gripping his chest—not only the emotional pain of losing Luis, but the physical pain of the wound in his thigh, where one of Humberto's bullets had grazed him, leaving a burning furrow that bled lightly, soaking the seat and leaving a metallic stench in the confined air of the vehicle. He sped down the highway south, the engine roaring like a dying beast, the city lights blurring in the rearview mirror like hazy memories.

Along the way, he pushed Asdrúbal's body out of the car as he entered the Provenza neighborhood, hearing the dull thud against the asphalt, a sound that reminded him of the bodies he'd left behind in his youth, during the political massacres.

That route took him far from his hideout in the north, toward the outskirts where police might set up ambushes, precisely in the direction his pursuer, he already knew, wouldn't think to search. Practical as ever, Matías was a survivor forged through years of intrigue and betrayal, where sly cunning was his main weapon, a subtle method of feigning humility to disarm his enemies. He turned at the Provenza bridge, zigzagging through Diamante I with tires screeching on the curves, then down the old road toward Terrazas, coming out through El Jardín and across Calle 56 onto Carrera 27, where the night traffic camouflaged him among cargo trucks and wandering motorcycles.

Luis had never mattered much to him; he was just a tool in his web of vengeance, a pawn on the board of grudges dating back to failed heists and betrayals, a son who had inherited his coldness but not his cunning. Matías felt a perverse relief: clean shots to the forehead, no agonizing wounded to explain at a hospital, no interrogations that might unravel his web of lies.

Collateral loss, he thought, without a shred of remorse, accelerating as the wound in his thigh throbbed like a second heart. He reached his hideout in a squatter settlement to the north, a precarious house of grey bricks, surrounded by stray dogs leaping with joy at his arrival, and piles of garbage that reeked of rot

under the moon. He sat in the dark living room, lit only by the glow of a street lamp filtering through the cracks, taking out the revolvers—his and Asdrúbal's—and cleaned them with a greasy rag, his hands trembling not from fear, but from blood loss.

He knew Humberto would come. Not head-on—that would be suicidal, a rookie mistake driven by blind rage—but cunningly, like a shadow sliding through the darkness.

Matías pulled two small pieces of gold from a hidden drawer: the legs of indigenous idols, stolen years before from a pawnshop during the days of "La Violencia," when he killed Liberals on orders from Laureano Gómez's government, feigning loyalty to the Conservative Party while looting. Those pieces were his emergency fund, relics of a past of blood and plunder, symbols of his cultivated hypocrisy: a man who presented himself as a victim while orchestrating massacres.

He waited, bandaging the wound with an improvised rag, the pain sharpening with every minute, but his mind wandering through the reflections that had defined him.

Hypocrisy was his master weapon, the sly method that outdid the habit of open rage practiced by politicians like Mussolini, or Gaitán. Benito Mussolini, with his inflamed rhetoric, stirred passions in the Italian masses, shouting from balconies with raised fists, inciting violence with speeches that smelled of sulfur and exacerbated nationalism. Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, in Colombia, a great admirer of Mussolini, did the same:

he spoke among the masses, fanning the fire of inequality with words that rang out like thunder, promising revolutions that proved his own undoing and set the stage for bloodbaths, like the Bogotazo.

But Matías had learned that open rage was a mistake; it made the speaker vulnerable, exposed him to counterattacks. Instead, the sly method—feigning humility, presenting himself as an innocent old man, a lamb among wolves—disarmed his enemies.

"There's no proof against me," he always said, blaming others for his crimes, turning his accusers into allies with false smiles and soft words.

He was the perfect Pharisee, the neighborhood's Caiaphas, who stole, embezzled, and killed, but presented himself as a victim of circumstance.

"I didn't do anything, it was others; I don't have a peso to my name, and I even secretly disapproved of their actions, but I have no power."

That's how he had survived: killing left and right during "La Violencia," leaving corpses out in the open for the vultures to feed on, treating human bodies as mere meat, with no rituals or Christian burials that held no interest for him. Even his own son was nothing more than a loss, something he had to forget for the sake of his own survival.

Humanity is an obstacle, he thought, as the pain made him sweat.

It didn't take long. The roar of a motorcycle approached, stopping outside with a muffled cut of the engine. Humberto came in through the back door, which Matías had deliberately left ajar, like an invitation

into the trap. Still wearing his dark glasses and fake moustache, he sighed, smiling, at the sight of Matías, but his revolver was ready, aimed at the old man's chest.

"You can kill me if you want," Matías said, in a weak, persuasive voice, raising his hands in surrender, his tone as meek as a grandfather telling stories. "I'm a poor old man who's already lost his son. But I have this for you, dear friend. I think there's been enough blood already. Come, sit down. Let me offer you a coffee to calm your nerves."

His words were an echo of films like *The Godfather*, which Matías had watched dozens of times, memorizing dialogue for situations just like this: feigning fragility to disarm.

Humberto, unsettled, lowered his weapon slightly, drawn by his thirst for gold and soothed by the false promise of peace. Matías got up, limping, pouring a steaming cup of coffee from the pot he'd prepared, its strong, bitter aroma filling the room, masking the stench of blood. He held out the cup, his hand trembling from the real weakness of his wound, but his mind calculating every second.

Humberto stepped forward, his finger still on the trigger, but he reached out his free hand to take the cup. In that instant, both acted at once: Matías, seizing the opportunity, drew a hidden revolver from under the table with a speed surprising for a wounded man; Humberto, sensing the betrayal, raised his weapon. The shots rang out simultaneously, a deadly duet that shook the precarious walls of the house. Matías's bullet struck Humberto's chest, who staggered backward, the cup

falling to the ground and shattering into pieces, the coffee spilling like black blood. Humberto's bullet hit Matías's abdomen, a searing pain that dropped him to his knees. Humberto, dying, stammered a curse.

"Die!" he murmured in a final gasp, before collapsing, lifeless, before touching the ground, his eyes open in an eternal accusation, like the victims of the macabre Doctor Mortis.

Matías, gasping, dragged himself to the phone to call emergency services, but the pain overcame him. He shouted "Help!" to the neighbors before losing consciousness, his mind wandering to one last thought: his sly method had won out once more, but the price this time was very high.

He woke hours later at the clinic, wrapped in a cold sweat and a pain piercing his belly like a bar of fire. The room's white light burned his eyes, and the smell of iodine reminded him of other scenes where he'd pretended to be a victim to escape graver blame.

Inspector Zuluaga sat beside the bed, cap on his knees, his gaze dry, the kind that grants neither pity nor doubt. He had a thick moustache and a scar that sank into his cheek, like a line fate had drawn to remind him of the risks of his trade.

"So you're alive," he said, finally, without raising his voice. "What a wonder. Others with lesser wounds would already be six feet under."

Matías tried to sit up, but the pain made him groan.

"I'm a victim," he murmured, with a tremor he couldn't tell was fear or pride. "That man… that terrorist attacked me."

Zuluaga looked at him in silence for a moment, then closed the notebook he held in his hands.

"Drop the act, Argüello. You haven't been a victim a single day in your life. I have your record. I know about your schemes, your accomplices, the deaths you've passed off as justice or necessity. What you do isn't self-defense: it's a trade."

Matías clenched his teeth; his voice came out hoarse, dry, like a stone rolling.

"So what? We all do what we can to survive."

"No," Zuluaga replied, leaning in a little. "You're a manipulator. You call your cowardice cunning."

"You dress up barbarism as order."

"Accusing me doesn't make you smarter," Zuluaga snapped, "it makes you more of a swindler."

Matías let out a broken laugh, which immediately turned into a groan.

"You men in uniform talk about morality as though your hands weren't stained too. There's no difference between your justice and my business. Except you kill with a stamp, and I kill with a gun."

Zuluaga held his gaze, unmoved.

"The difference is simple," he said. "You enjoyed it. And don't deny it. I saw it in the statements, in the trail you left. It's not hunger that kills, Matías. It's resentment. And you've cultivated it like someone tending a wound so it never heals."

Matías clenched his fist; the IV needle trembled.

"When I get out, I'll take my revenge on David Saint-André and his whole family," he growled, his voice soaked in fury and saliva.

Zuluaga looked at him for a long while, unblinking. The silence in the room was dense, charged with a tension that seemed to thicken the air.

Then he sighed, stood, and opened the door.

Outside, in the hallway, my mother waited with her hands clasped in her lap. I was beside her, staring at the worn tile floor. When Zuluaga gave a brief nod, she stood and walked in slowly, like someone entering a circus tent housing a caged lion.

Matías turned his head toward her. His eyes, sunken in their sockets from pain and fever, gleamed with a mix of surprise and contempt.

My mother stopped beside the bed. She said nothing right away. She only looked at him with the stale sorrow carried by women who have already suffered too much.

"Mr. Argüello," she said at last, in a quiet but firm voice. "I've come to ask you not to harm my family."

Matías let out a hoarse laugh that ended in a cough.

"What makes you think I give a damn what you're asking?"

"Nothing," she answered, unfazed. "But I'm asking anyway. Marco is seven years old. He doesn't know anything about what happened between you and my husband. He's a child."

"Your husband left me out on the street," Matías growled, his voice full of venom. "I'm wounded to death from the debts I had to take on."

"It was you who broke the workplace regulations," my mother said, and her tone wasn't pleading, but simply stating a fact. "You drove drunk. You put people at risk. That can't be defended."

Matías clenched his teeth, his trembling hand closing into a fist over the sheet.

"Did you come here to mock me?"

"If you feel my husband offended you in some way, take it up with him. But not with my son. He has nothing to do with any of this."

A long silence fell. Matías looked at her with an intensity that was frightening, as though he wanted to pierce her with his eyes. Then, slowly, a crooked smile crossed his face.

"You know what, old woman?" he said, his voice thick. "I'd rather go to hell than show you people a single kind gesture. Damn you! Damn all of you!"

My mother didn't move. She only nodded, as though she'd already known that would be his answer.

"May God forgive you, then," she said, as she led me out.

Zuluaga, who had stayed at the door, received us in silence.

Already in the hallway, my mother stopped and leaned a hand against the wall. She was trembling.

"You didn't have to humiliate yourself like that," Zuluaga said quietly.

"I didn't do it for him," she answered, straightening up. "I did it out of Christian charity. Now we must shake the dust off our sandals and go."

My father didn't sleep those days, fearing Matías Argüello would escape from the hospital.

"Stay alert," Inspector Zuluaga told him when he spoke to him the next day, leaving his words hanging in the air like an order that admitted no argument. "A man who's made a habit of evil doesn't resign himself to dying between clean sheets."

The nights became sleepless. Any rustle on the sidewalk woke us with our hearts clenched, convinced the killer was returning, limping beneath the corner streetlamp. We slept half-awake, huddled in bed, my father's revolver under the pillow and the lamp lit past midnight. Silence was a watchful animal breathing over us.

It was then that my grandmothers, with that authority possessed by women who understand life as a cycle of guilt and repair, called the whole family together to pray a novena for the end of that ordeal.

"David and Adelia have been generous with all of us," Nonita said, looking at the reluctant ones. "Now is the time to give thanks with prayer. Evil isn't defeated with bullets, but with prayer."

I remember that phrase like a household dogma. In her tone was a conviction that mixed the superstition of old mountain women with the firmness of someone who has read the Bible the way one reads one's own destiny. It was she, too, who chose the saint:

"Saint Gabriel the Archangel," she proclaimed, "God's messenger, but also His warrior. The one who confronts demons when words are no longer enough."

The novena traveled through the family's homes like a pilgrimage of atonement across Bucaramanga's middle-class neighborhoods. Ochre façades, courtyards with guava trees, streets where vendors called out avocados and mamoncillo at dusk became the setting for a civil liturgy. No one mentioned the IDEMA uproar or the recent killings; the air was thick with guilt seeking peace.

At Aunt Chavela's house, on the first day, the prayer was also a feast. The smell of mute stew filled the living room, and, beneath the image of the archangel with his sword drawn, Nonita prayed in a voice that seemed to come from underground. In her trembling was something more than faith: her old battle against evil.

"The demon of envy divides the just," she said, and the rosary beads clicked like grain falling onto a coffin.

My father, head bowed, murmured his prayer with the rigidity of a man who doesn't fully believe, but who fears tempting fate. We invoked Saint Gabriel as Christ's herald, crushing discord, that poison dividing brothers, and the smell of the stew mixed with the candles, uniting body and soul in a silent repair.

The second day, in Terrazas, Aunt Eustaquia—her bun tight, her gaze severe—read a prayer written in her own hand, invoking peace "against the ambition that makes us forget our neighbor."

Then, without transition, she quoted Dostoevsky, with a solemnity that surprised us:

"If God does not exist, everything is permitted. Matías believed that. He believed crime was a form of freedom."

An uncomfortable silence followed. Uncle Javier, who had brought pandeyucas, lowered his gaze.

My mother, hands clasped, barely murmured:

"And God was never absent, Eustaquia. That's why that scoundrel is dying in agony. For wanting to hurt little Marco."

"Do you know why they beat children?" Aunt Eustaquia nodded, and went on reading: "Because that's how the executioner unloads his rage. It's for pleasure, for impunity. What harmony can ever be justified by the tears of a single child?"

That Dostoevsky line struck me like a thrown stone. Tears fell without warning as I remembered my father's belt, my mother's quick hand. I feared they would return once the routine resumed. I covered my face, trying to smother my sobs.

"Why are you making Marco cry?" Aunt Jazmín asked Aunt Eustaquia.

I couldn't answer. Shame and fear choked me.

They pressed, and my silence weighed on the room. Then my mother stepped forward, quickly, as though to shield me with her own body.

"It's because of his little friends who were murdered," Mamá said. "He has a notebook full of drawings where they scream before they die. He makes them every afternoon so he won't forget them."

We prayed that Saint Gabriel, Christ's ally, would defeat the demon of greed, which clouds judgment and turns a man into a wolf against his own flock. The family photos on the walls seemed mute witnesses to how faith restored our clarity.

The third gathering, at Uncle Ramiro's house, changed the tone. Ramiro was a man of few books, but of precise memories. Halfway through the novena, rosary half-finished, he cleared his throat and spoke with a tremor that wasn't devotion, but memory.

"I knew Matías when he wore the blue uniform and carried the Christ on his chest," he said. "He was one of the *chulavitas* from Vélez."

The sentence fell like thunder. The women crossed themselves, and the children—myself among them—looked up.

"It was the year fifty," he went on, "when the Liberals were hiding in the hills. He came into town with twenty men and a list of names. They said they were after Communists, but they killed farmers who'd never even read a pamphlet. They burned houses, raped women, buried the dead in a ditch by the Frío stream. I remember it because I was a boy and I saw them come back at dawn, their boots stained with dried blood. Matías wore a scapular at his belt. To the one who confronted him about it, he said: 'It isn't blood: it's justice.'"

Then, as though an old floodgate had opened, Nonita spoke. Her voice came out low, aged by memories she'd always avoided naming.

"Don't think the *chulavitas* came from nowhere," she said. "They were grown like thorns. I was a girl when the Liberal mob killed my uncle Lucrecio for having voted for Laureano Gómez. They cut him into pieces and threw him in the river, just for that. And even before that, the wound was already there: in the thirties, when Olaya Herrera came to power, many Liberals took over lands that weren't theirs. Those men were later raised to 'take back' what had been seized, and out came the *chulavitas*. Then the other side came to collect. And so we've all kept avenging ourselves, again and again."

A dense silence followed her account. The candles trembled, as though they too were listening.

"God save us from confusing justice with revenge," Nonita Kuki added, gripping her rosary.

Aunt Lucía, young as she was, couldn't hold back.

"That's why we never break out of that vicious circle," she said. "When is someone finally going to forgive someone?"

I, my eyes still wet, felt the words seeking me out.

"This is what we do," I said. "Unlike those violent men, we don't kill, we don't scheme, we don't wish harm on anyone."

That night, the prayer carried the weight of a collective confession. We invoked Saint Gabriel as Christ's warrior, crushing the violence that disguises itself as order, leaving only ashes. I saw in my father a mix of dread and understanding, as though he finally

grasped that the demons of our history are never killed: they're inherited.

On the fourth day, in La Aurora, Aunt Prudencia—the youngest, a reader of souls and saints—brought a worn edition of her Protestant Bible. She read the passage where Christ says only by becoming like children shall we enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

Then she looked up and said:

"This country corrects its children under the excuse of order. It's the children who should be correcting us. Look how little Marco was always right, and none of us wanted to listen to him."

No one spoke. Only Nonita broke the silence:

"But God did listen to him, and He has watched over him. Let us pray for Marco's wellbeing, and that He take that man who threatens to hurt him into His Kingdom—or into Hell, if that is His judgment."

We prayed that Saint Gabriel, Christ's messenger, would defeat the demon of unjust suffering, transforming pain into a testimony of redemption, and the rosebushes in the courtyard seemed to hold the echo of our prayers.

From that night on, the novena stopped being a routine of prayers and sweets. It became an examination of conscience. Every house was a station of the soul, and every relative brought with them a memory we shared with joy.

In the Álvarez neighborhood, Aunt Lucía spoke of the demon of rivalry, asking Saint Gabriel to protect our shared blood:

"Christ taught us to be one; the archangel cuts the chains that divide us."

At her house in the Obras Públicas neighborhood, Aunt Lila cited the story of Joseph, praying that Saint Gabriel, in service of divine truth, would give us a heart as great as his, capable not only of forgiving the brothers who wanted to kill him, but also of sharing with them the blessings God had granted him.

At my grandmother Elvia's house, in Mutis, Esperanza asked forgiveness from her enemies for some old grievance, begging Saint Gabriel to defeat the resentment eating away at her like acid:

"Christ's forgiveness heals what resentment destroys," Aunt Rosa nodded from her rocking chair.

In Lagos I, Potasio, with his Sansón wine, raised a toast to "the light that still puts up with us," invoking Christ's warrior who crushes despair:

"Christ lifts us up when the world drags us down."

On the ninth day, a Saturday in August, the house in García Rovira filled up like a church. The walls exhaled the smell of wax and cane-sugar water. We read the story of Solomon and prayed the final mystery beneath the image of Saint Gabriel, whose wings seemed to flutter in the room's gloom. We invoked the archangel as Christ's ally, sealing victory over chaos, transforming fear into hope.

A knock at the door made us jump.

It was Zuluaga. All our faces fell silent in a gesture of shock, no one daring to guess the reason for such an untimely arrival.

He came in with his uniform soaked in sweat, his face hardened by the news he carried.

"Matías Argüello has died," he said. "Generalized gangrene. His body rotted from within before justice could touch him."

The prevailing tension dissolved suddenly, like in exorcism films, when the demon oppressing a household's residents is sent down into the depths of Hades.

The air filled with sighs and relieved laughter.

Nonita closed her eyes and murmured:

"God does not err: sometimes He judges with fire from within."

My father exhaled like someone setting down an old weight.

My mother smiled, satisfied.

The women began an improvised prayer, and the men, in silence, lifted the chairs and set them against the wall as though preparing an altar. After a few minutes, weeping mixed with murmurs of relief, fear with calm.

Tamales, *masato*, and hot chocolate were served at the table. And there, amid prayers and stories, I understood something the books barely touch on: that forgiveness does not erase the crime, only looks upon it without hatred. That good does not defeat evil: it endures it. And that within that endurance—mysterious, weary, unbreakable—chance is providential, and looks a great deal like grace.

London, May 2003, Sincelejo, October 2025

Proof